Tributaries

On the name of the journal:

"Alabama's waterways intersect its folkways at every level. Early settlement and cultural diffusion conformed to drainage patterns. The Coastal Plain, the Black Belt, the Foothills, and the Tennessee Valley remain distinct traditional as well as economic regions today. The state's cultural landscape, like its physical one, features a network of "tributaries" rather than a single dominant mainstream."

—Jim Carnes, from the Premiere Issue

Tributaries

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Joey Brackner
Editor

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Editor's Note

Sometimes an opportunity presents itself and should not be passed up. That is how I must describe the composition of this thematic issue of *Tributaries*. We have taken advantage of a flurry of recent scholarship on African-American music in Alabama and, in particular, on the secular roots of popular music. The articles in this issue offer five disparate views of this subject by a diverse group of scholars and artists.

"The Life and Death of Pioneer Bluesman Butler 'String Beans' May: 'Been Here, Made His Quick Duck, And Got Away'" is Doug Seroff's and Lynn Abbott's account of a giant of popular music who by virtue of their painstaking historical research has now been given his due. We appreciate their sharing of this excerpt from their forthcoming book on the rise of blues in black vaudeville. Kevin Nutt, an independent scholar and radio producer from Montgomery, contributed his article on the life and importance of Butler County bluesman Ed Bell. We received permission to reprint the monograph "Tracking Down a Legend: The 'Jaybird' Coleman Story" by noted book collector and researcher James Patrick Cather. Willie Earl King, a blues artist, activist, and educator from Old Memphis (Pickens County) contributed a short essay on the blues. Accompanying his essay is a photographic exploration of juke blues by renowned blues photographer Axel Küstner. Dr. Jerrilyn McGregory of Florida State University sent us an article on Sumter County roots musician Vera Ward Hall, who lives on through the recordings of the Lomax family and others. Last but not least, we have a lengthy documentation by John Garst of Athens, Georgia, of the Alabama version of the "John Henry" legend and ballad .

Our reviewers provide in-depth descriptions of two new documentary products presenting Alabama folk music. Mike Luster offers a review of *The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 1,* produced by Steve Grauberger for the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture. Joyce Cauthen reviews *Alabama: From Lullabies to Blues*, an Alabama-specific volume of the heralded Lomax family field recordings series.

During this past year, the Alabama Folklife Association launched its

website — www.alabamafolklife.org. At this site you can order this and past issues of *Tributaries*, most of the documentary items that have been reviewed by us, and other products that will enhance your understanding of Alabama folk culture. For your convenience, we have also included information about the Alabama Folklife Association and the documentary products that it sells at the back of the issue.

I appreciate the many suggestions by AFA members and our other constituents. I also wish to acknowledge the work of Randall Williams and Ben Beard in helping to produce this issue. Vinnie Jones, the administrative assistant at the Alabama State Council on the Arts and Megan Midkiff, an intern at ASCA have also assisted in the production of this issue. We welcome your suggestions, comments and contributions for future issues.

Joey Brackner
Alabama Folklife Program
Alabama State Council on the Arts
201 Monroe Street
Montgomery, AL 36130-1800
334-242-4076, x-225
joey@arts.state.al.us

The Life and Death of Pioneer Bluesman Butler "String Beans" May: "Been Here, Made His Quick Duck, And Got Away"

Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott

Small black vaudeville theaters, which proliferated at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, provided the principal platform for the concrete formulation of popular blues, and for the subsequent emergence of blues from its rural Southern birthplace. The state of Alabama can claim several prominent vaudeville blues pioneers, men such as Charles Anderson from Birmingham, H. Franklin "Baby" Seals from Mobile, and Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport from Anniston.[1] Florence, Alabama, claims composer W. C. Handy, known by tradition as the "Father of the Blues." But the man most responsible for popularizing the "real blues" on the public stage in those emergent days was Montgomery's multi-talented wellspring of invention and creativity, Butler "String Beans" May. String Beans was the greatest attraction in African-American vaudeville, the first recognizable blues *star*.

Butler May was born in Montgomery on August 18, 1894, to Butler, Sr., and Laura Robinson May. Two brothers, William and Horace, and five sisters, Rosebud, Minnie, Clara, Sadie and Blanche, rounded out the large May family. City directories indicate that the Mays moved about a great deal during String Beans's youth; the family lived at numerous local addresses, most within or near the Oak Park section of Montgomery. It seems they were living at 15 Watts Street when String Beans was born. His father is invariably identified as a farmer. It appears Butler May, Sr., died in or around 1900. Beginning in 1902, the Montgomery City Directory lists Laura May, "widow," as head of the May household. Her occupation is variously described as laundress, domestic, or cook.

Lifelong Montgomery resident Joseph Nesbitt, who was born in 1902, recalled something of Butler May's family history. During Nesbitt's childhood, the Mays and the Nesbitts were next-door neighbors at 115 and 117 Tuscaloosa Street:

> [The May family] didn't own the house that they lived in on Tuscaloosa. . . . See, his mother was a widowed woman, and . . . she reared her children without a husband. She was a legally married woman all right, good Christian woman . . ., and he was a Montgomery boy, and everybody liked him.[2]

According to Nesbitt, young Butler May attended the old Swayne School, later renamed for Booker T. Washington; and the May family worshipped at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, across from the Alabama State Capitol. Dr. Martin Luther King came to pastor this church in 1954, the year before the beginning of Montgomery's landmark bus boycott.

Nesbitt retained this recollection of hearing String Beans perform in his Montgomery neighborhood:

> He'd go around in a truck, with his piano on there, and he played, you know. . . . He'd always do it in the summer, see? When people could come on their porches and hear him and see him. And his mother and sisters was always telling, "My son will be out," and "My brother will be along this evening." They'd give 'em the time of day, and my mother would always arrange her business so that she could be out there and see him and enjoy him, too . . .
>
> His piano was on a truck, and he was seated at the piano. . . . Some man would be driving his dray, that he was riding on, or his truck, or whatever it was. There wasn't no top on it . . .
>
> He got a truck and put a piano up there and played his own music and sang his own music.[3]

Butler May's luminous career in black vaudeville is candidly portrayed in contemporaneous reports from the African-American press, especially *The*

Indianapolis Freeman, a weekly newspaper which served as "central headquarters" for news and gossip of the black entertainment profession. It appears Butler May was only fourteen years old when he set out from Montgomery with Will Benbow's Chocolate Drops Company, to perform at the Belmont Street Theater in Pensacola, Florida.[4] A note from Pensacola in *The Freeman* of April 17, 1909, assured, "The show is still making good . . . Gertie Raney [sic], our coon shouter, is making good with her late hit, 'If the World Don't Treat You Right, Why Don't You Come Home.' Butler May, our funny man, is still pleasing."

Thus, in what may have been his first away-from-home engagement, Butler May shared the Belmont Street Theater stage with Ma Rainey. Also on the roster was Jelly Roll Morton's girlfriend Stella Taylor, and quite possibly Morton himself was present for Butler May's stage "debut" in Pensacola. When interviewed by Alan Lomax, Morton testified:

> Well, this String Beans grew very famous. . . . He used to bring down the house when he sang "I Got Elgin Movements in My Hips, with a Twenty Year Guarantee" and "What Did Deacon Jones Do, My Lord, When the Lights Went Out," or "Gimme a Piece of What You're Settin' On" . . . and such stuff as that. . . . He was the greatest comedian I ever knew, and a very, very swell fellow. He was over six feet tall, very slender with big liver lips, and light complexioned. His shoes were enormous and he wore trousers impossible to get over his feet without a shoe horn. He always had a big diamond in his front tooth. He was the first guy I ever saw with a diamond in his mouth, and I guess I got the idea for my diamond from him.[5]

A vernacular comedian named Kid Kelly was also with Benbow's Chocolate Drops in Pensacola. During the fall of 1909, May and Kelly teamed up and headed for the newly-opened Luna Park Theater on Decatur Street in Atlanta, where a *Freeman* correspondent noted: "Paul Carter, the popular stage manager, has selected some of the best talent. . . . The Raineys are here with some new songs and funny jokes. . . . The team of May and Kelly, singing and dancing comedians, is the talk of the town. Butler May 'grabbed' the audience the first

FIGURE 1.
Butler "String Beans" May and Sweetie May *(The New York Age*, June 10, 1915).

night he worked with his funny dancing and his own song, 'Mary Jane.'"

It was at Luna Park that Butler May's "String Beans" persona emerged. A Luna Park reporter noted in *The Freeman* of January 29, 1910, that, "String Beans, better known as Butler May, is bringing the house down with 'Play it On.'" Later that spring, "Butler May, known as String Bean," was "still the favorite, and takes the house by storm when he takes that unknown trip."

The descriptive term, "that unknown trip," is a bit of forgotten black stage patois, which is repeatedly encountered in connection with the earliest theatrical appearances of blues. Curiously redolent of 1960s "youth culture" jargon, it suggests the process of improvisation, and evokes a collective cultural memory associated with the public dissemination of blues. *Freeman* critic Billy E. Lewis revealed something of String Beans's "unknown trip" in this 1916 appraisal:

> Great piano artists often find it necessary to label their compositions before most people know the subject or the thought that they wish to convey. Beans' work talks for itself. It suggests its own kind of name, and which no one knows in particular, not even Beans, but at that those blues say something definite. They moan and weep and cry, setting up kindred emotions in the listeners, and who often must yell, or give vent to their feelings in some way for relief.

Under String Beans's continued domination, the stage at Luna Park became the first recognizable beacon of blues activity in Atlanta. Luna Park's sympathetic pit band was led by pianist H. B. "Caggie" Howard, who went on to play at Atlanta's more famous "81" Theater, preceding Eddie Heywood, Sr.

String Beans also found a highly sympathetic new stage partner in Sweetie Matthews, a "dainty little Southern soubrette" from New Orleans who soon became his wife. He had not yet turned sixteen when he advised *The Freeman* in July 1910:

> Butler May is pleasing the people with his own act entitled "Jasper's Dream in the Pits of Hell," assisted by Sweetie Matthews, who is singing that "Oh, You Devil Rag!"
>
> Porter and Porter are cleaning up here with their 15 minute act.

> Our scenery painter paints new scenery for the house twice a week.
>
> Butler May, better known as Papa String Beans, is tearing the house down every night singing "I've Got Elgin Movements in My Hip and Twenty Years Guaranteed." He is still packing the house and has been for ten months in succession.
>
> Regards to all in and out of the profession. Also Kenner and Lewis at Belmont Street Theater, Pensacola, Fla. Hello W. M. Benboe [sic], write to me.
>
> BUTLER MAY
>
> Stage Manager Luna Park Theater.

Apparently, String Beans was the originator of the famous blues metaphor of "Elgin movements," which took off on an advertising slogan for Elgin watches. It reverberates on several 1920s and 1930s Race recordings, including Robert Johnson's immortal "Walking Blues," from 1936.

In August 1910 String Beans left Luna Park to become stage manager of the Queen Theater in hometown Montgomery, and a glowing report soon followed:

> The people are well pleased with the up-to-date shows that he has put on. The act of the first part of the week was "Under the Harvest Moon," a three-act musical comedy, assisted by Danford Cross, our straight man, also Sweetie May. Watkins and Watkins are cleaning up singing "Grizzly Bear." Butler May is well pleased with the bunch of people. Mr. Taylor, the manager is delighted over the packed houses that he has every night. Butler May as "String Bean" is taking the house by storm singing "I Wish I Were in Heaven with My Brother Bill."

Later that fall, Will Benbow recruited String Beans and Sweetie May to headline his new Alabama Rosebuds Company on a tour of Fred Barrasso's pioneer Memphis-based Tri-State Circuit.[6] At the Temple Theater in New Orleans, Sweetie's hometown, the "String Bean Duo" made "a tremendous hit" singing the blues ballad "Casey Jones." From New Orleans they proceeded to

the Amuse U No. 2 Theater at Vicksburg, Mississippi.

In March 1911 Beans and Sweetie headlined a three-week engagement at Barrasso's flagship Savoy Theater in Memphis, then went directly to his newly acquired Majestic Theater in Hot Springs, Arkansas. A reporter judged them "the best team ever appearing" there. While Beans and Sweetie were in Hot Springs, Fred Barrasso made a trip to Chicago where, among other things, he arranged a booking for Beans and Sweetie at the Monogram Theater on State Street.

Only sixteen years old, just two years out of Montgomery, String Beans was the brightest shooting star in the Southern vaudeville universe, which included Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, *et al*. In May 1911 String Beans and Sweetie May embarked on their history-making first excursion across the Mason-Dixon line, headed for Chicago to introduce the blues on the Monogram stage. If their arrival at the Monogram had the air of an invasion, it also marked a cultural reunion, as Beans and Sweetie's "handsome bunch of racial oddities" created a furor of recognition on State Street. Their overwhelming success with Northern audiences opened the floodgates for other Southern acts, and insured a prominent place for the blues in American entertainment.

In their first week at the Monogram, Beans and Sweetie shared the bill with legendary singer-songwriter Chris Smith, "a hit-factory in the ragtime song line." On May 27, 1911, at the conclusion of their second week on State Street, Beans received his first review from *The Freeman's* critic-extraordinaire, Sylvester Russell:

> MAY AND MAY THRILL AT MONOGRAM
>
> Butler May, who I am told, is the heaviest team comedian of the lower South, appeared with his wife at the Monogram last Monday, for a return. . . . Whatever it is that May hands over, nobody knows, or cares, but it thrills and creates riots of laughter. This heavy Northern atmosphere and the presence of a noted critic all seem strange to him, to inform him that he is not great, but clever as a mixer with colored audiences who hail from Mobile or the State of Tennessee.

Although Sylvester Russell occasionally alleged himself to be concerned

FIGURE 2.
Butler "Stringbeans" May and Sweetie May *(The Freeman*, August 26, 1911).

with helping Beans "improve" his act and advance his career, it was clear from the beginning that he had little use for "whatever it is that May hands over." Russell was unequipped to appreciate the rising tide of vernacular arts from the "lower South." A few months after his initial assessment, the "noted critic" quipped, "Butler May is of an ancient type of oddities inconceivable, but apt enough to watch or wait for a word or moment to cause a scream of laughter. But he is a comedian by recognition of his growing importance as an eccentric dancer, and his wife, believe me, has some new purple clothes." The next time Russell saw Beans and Sweetie, "in a new act, with 'String Beans' as ruler of Hades," he noted, "String Beans, more unique than ever before, gave us a piano burlesque that was clever because of its aptness."

From Chicago, Beans and Sweetie proceeded to Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Louisville, where a reporter described their program of cutting-edge vocal blues:

> This being their first appearance in Louisville, they open very big, and their first song, "The Sweetest Man in Town," was a sure hit. Butler May sang "Get You a Kitchen Mechanic," and it stormed the house. He was compelled to take several encores. The closing song, "Alabama Bound," was heartily received. Without a doubt this was one of the best acts seen in Louisville and closed a good bill.

Back at the Lyre Theater in Louisville in September 1911, May and May closed an especially strong program that included Laura Smith:

> The house played to over 2,000 patrons, and over 500 people were turned away. Never before since the house has been opened has such a crowd gathered to witness a show. The . . . big scream of the bill [was] May and May, billed as the funny String Beans. . . . His new song of "High Brown Skin Girl," will make a rabbit hug a hound.

Beans and Sweetie continued their tour of Midwestern theaters until January 1912, and then went "direct to Montgomery, Ala., there to enjoy the pleasures of the family fireside." From Montgomery they proceeded to the Globe Theater

in Jacksonville, Florida, to fill an extended winter engagement. The offering at the Globe was touted in *The Freeman* of January 27, 1912: "Largest Vaudeville Bill Ever Put On In Colored Playhouse. . . . In no theater, North or South, is there a theater giving such a bill as the following: Frank Montgomery, amusement director; May and May, known as the original String Beans . . . the Rainey Trio, Buster and Willie Porter, Muriel Ringgold . . . [and others] with a seven piece orchestra under the leadership of Eugene Francis Mikell."

Surrounded by great vaudeville talent, May and May stayed at Frank Crowd's Globe Theater through the spring of 1912, "playing to crowded houses" with Beans serving as stage manager. When they returned north to the Monogram, rhetoric appropriated from one of Sylvester Russell's reviews became String Beans's own patented stage axiom:

> If we are to live forever in Ethiopia, let us live by all means at the Monogram. String Beans (Butler May) stretched forth his hand again last Monday evening in the same old way and created a riot before a full house.

Moving on to the Crown Garden Theater in Indianapolis, Beans and Sweetie sang "several new songs, all of which are hits—'Ball the Jack Rage [sic],' 'All Night Long,' and others. Mr. May also presided at the piano during his act. Some act and some drawing card . . . just what the doctor orders for a man with a dull, blue feeling."

Sylvester Russell witnessed Beans and Sweetie being celebrated as "the candy of State Street." However, when May and May returned to the Monogram Theater in August 1912, the self-important critic was not at all sweet on their latest song creation, "Pray for the Lights to Go Out": "String Beans brought something new, but his sarcastic admixture of religious humor must be condemned. It is hard to teach old dogs new tricks, especially if they have never been trained, consequently we are obliged to excuse Beans, as one funny, original comedian whom people come miles to see."

Russell's criticism was close enough to a personal insult to provoke a pointed rebuttal from Beans, which appeared under the title, "How To Get A Good Write-up":

> Performers playing in Chicago are generally knocked by Sylvester Russell if they fail to come across with the goods. This is what Russell calls criticism. In my judgement, critics should not accept money from performers.
>
> May and May have been getting nice mention from Russell right along until they refused to hand out any more "dough." Performers, the knock of Russell does not do us harm in our business. He is not a critic. He is simply a money receiver. A big dinner set for him at Dago & Russell's will work wonders...
>
> Yours truly,
> Butler May

Russell responded with a verbose defense of his professional integrity, followed by a new line of attack: "As a performer, String Beans is not yet eligible for the big time in white theaters. His songs only appeal to colored people; his smut would be ruled out and his course of stage work at every performance is improbable and I have found it impossible to teach him or train his mind by coaching."

On the heels of this exchange, a rumor circulated that Beans and Russell had been involved in a "setoo." Russell denied that they had come to blows, and correctly stated that he was "old enough to be String Beans' father."

When Beans and Sweetie played the Crown Garden in late August 1912, theater manager Tim Owsley appraised their "Pray, Let the Lights Go Out" as being "in the riot class." In 1916, nearly four years after Beans and Sweetie introduced it in Chicago, "Pray for the Lights to Go Out" was published as a "Negro Shouting Song" by white composer-publisher Will E. Skidmore. It was identified on the sheet music cover as "That New 'Ballin the Jack' Song . . . Featured by Leroy 'Lasses' White this Season with Neil O'Brien's Minstrels." The lyrics were credited to Skidmore and Renton Tunnah:

> Father was a deacon in a hard shell church,
> Way down South where I was born;
> People used to come to church from miles around,

Just to hear the Holy work go on,
Father grabs a sister 'round the neck and says,
Sister, won't you sing this song.
The sister tells the deacon that she didn't have time,
Felt religion coming on.
Just then somebody got up turn'd the lights all out
And you ought to heard that sister shout.
She hollered Brother, if you want to spread joy,
Just pray for the lights to stay out.[7]

Skidmore's wasn't the first version of "Pray for the Lights to Go Out" to be deposited for copyright. In the fall of 1915 the Copyright Office processed a manuscript of the same song, as by Clarence Woods, with virtually identical lyrics credited to Clyde Olney. Skidmore somehow gained control of "Pray for the Lights to Go Out" and parlayed it into a four-song "Deacon Series" that had lasting influence in black vaudeville. The other titles in Skidmore's "Deacon Series" were "It Takes a Long, Tall Brown Skin Gal to Make a Preacher Lay His Bible Down," "Somebody's Done Me Wrong" and "When I Get Out of No-Man's Land (I Can't Be Bothered with No Mule)."

String Beans apparently didn't care to protect his songs, as many of his contemporaries were doing. Maybe he didn't expect to live long enough to collect royalty payments. He resisted mainstream mechanisms, often to his financial disadvantage.

In May 1913 String Beans and Sweetie May were both seen in New Orleans, but working separately. After nearly two years of riotous success, the great "String Beans Duo" had suddenly split up, without a public explanation. By September Beans was in Atlanta, working solo. Making the rounds of his Southern haunts of a few years previous, he stormed Pensacola's Belmont Street Theater in November and made "a big hit, singing nothing but his own compositions. He is singing 'The Titanic Blues,' and receives three and four encores every night."

Beans spent the rest of 1913 singing his blues in familiar Southern theaters, then headed back North with a new partner, Jessie May Horn. Their first stand was at the Monogram, where, according to Sylvester Russell, Beans dispensed

his "usual curious hilarity of fun and stage derogation."

In January 1914 Crown Garden Theater manager Tim Owsley described the "String Beans effect" in Indianapolis:

> Somepin' doin' at the Crown Garden theater this week. String Beans is there and everybody knows it. Indiana avenue looked like a circus day, waiting for the parade last Monday night. . . . They came from far and near, and when he made his appearance, a shout went up. Now, I am writing of what actually took place and not inspired by a money consideration. . . . At times the yelling was almost deafening.
>
> String Beans has an improvement on the kind of work he does over that of all others. His "Blues" gets 'em, and then his "Balling the Jack" is his feature . . .
>
> Jessie May is good support. She enters into the work with the String Beans spirit. This means a kind of abandon or studied indifference, not caring much what she did. . . . She sings prettily . . . and talks to her partner in a way that helps the fun. Their little tango is neat. In fact, some especially good acting is noted in the run of the act.

Owsley predicted that if "he improves his stuff and keeps straight, he will be imitated just as Bert Williams is imitated." That same week a report from the Dixie Theater in Bessemer, Alabama, noted, "Kid May, Beans No. 2, gets his."

Billed as "Sweet Papa's String Beans," Butler and Jessie May went from Indianapolis to Cincinnati and other theater stops in Ohio. At the New Pekin Theater in Dayton they were "a scream from start to finish in front of a white and colored audience." At the Dunbar Theater in Columbus, people were "standing in the snow waiting to get in."

In March 1914 Beans and Jessie returned to the Monogram, where, by Sylvester Russell's account, Beans "imparted some more of his adaptability for promiscuous jollity of uncertain quality. Jessie May was pretty good." They moved on to St. Louis, then Louisville, where Beans hit a snag of sorts. According to an unusual notice in the mainstream *Louisville Herald*:

> The Olio and Ruby Theaters, rival playhouses playing to colored patronage on West Walnut Street, are engaged in a legal battle for the possession of the artistic talents of . . . "String Beans," an accomplished black-faced comedian of the natural kind, who has been drawing unprecedented crowds to the Olio every night.
>
> The management of the Ruby, after watching the crowds file daily into the rival institution, is seeking an attachment in the court . . . to prevent "String Beans" from exercising his genius at the Olio.
>
> The Ruby claims that it had String Beans booked and that he jumped his contract.

Beans filed a countersuit charging that, because he was wrongfully detained to appear in court, he had to cancel shows in Philadelphia and Detroit, where he would have made ninety dollars per week.[8] Apparently, this was the going rate for black vaudeville's biggest drawing attraction.

When Beans returned to Chicago in April 1914, he was "alone by himself," while his partner Jessie May was in the hospital, "very ill," but "fast improving and her recovery is sure. It is rumored that she has severed from String Beans."

After this unsettling report, nothing more was heard from Jessie May Horn. Beans's infamous break-ups were generally cloaked in vague references to "crushed hopes" and "severed relationships." It was *The Freeman's* unwritten policy to muffle stories that tended to reinforce negative stereotyping of black performers. Nevertheless, Beans acquired an odious reputation for abusing female partners.

In his solo act at the Monogram, Beans put on a "good piano comedy stunt." As usual, Russell quibbled: "In his monologue he told a story of a preacher giving warning of Gabriel when he blows his horn and how the boys on the roof blew horns. . . . When he has omitted a preacher swearing and the words 'My Lord' in one of his songs, he will become legitimate." Again in November 1914 Russell pontificated, "Beans continues to be legitimate except when he says 'Dog Gone.'" This bit of pettifoggery harbors a suggestion that Beans may have been singing a version of "Blind Man Blues," the verses of which contain the signature interjection, "Dog gone my soul." This blues classic

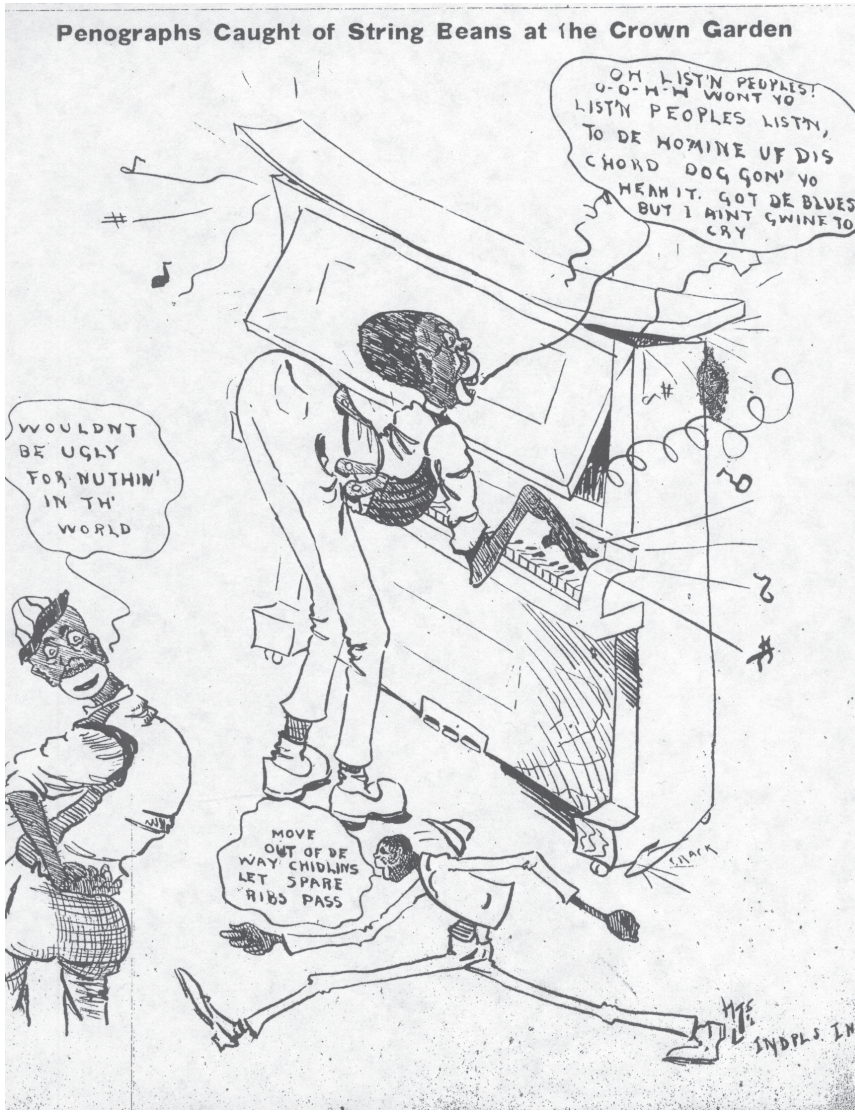

FIGURE 3.
The Freeman, May 16, 1914.

was copyrighted in 1919 by Eddie Green and Billie McLaurin, but according to W. C. Handy, who published the Green-McLaurin version, "Blind Man Blues" was "an echo of the celebrated String Beans himself, at the Monogram in Chicago."[9] Just as much as W. C. Handy, String Beans was responsible for the ascendancy of blues to a legitimate American popular music. Unlike Handy, however, Beans was never "legitimized."

From Chicago Beans journeyed to Detroit, where a *Freeman* correspondent found him "stopping traffic" in front of the Unique Theater: "His songs are a scream from start to finish, and his biggest hit is the 'Blues.' He got his all right." String Beans-and-blues was becoming an increasingly potent theme. When he returned to Indianapolis in May 1914, *The Freeman* ran a riveting pen-and-ink sketch of Beans looming over the Crown Garden Theater's upright piano and moaning, "Got de blues but I ain't gwine to cry." There was also this description of his piano masterpiece, "Titanic Blues:"

> "String Beans" . . . has an act of downright merit. This is particularly true of his last stunt—his "pianologue" if one may so call it.
>
> Butler May "String Beans," gives a pretty description of the sinking Titanic on the piano, greatly surprising the audience by his playing. He played a lively air, such as would be played when passengers are going on board a great ship. He played the dancing airs of what he conceived to be those of the various classes of passengers "as they danced." Amid these he throws in the minor monotony of the plunging vessel as it made its way. His knowledge of minor chords, chromatic scales, enabled him to give a weird, terrifying effect when the vessel went down.

Black folklorist and educator Willis Laurence James recalled having once witnessed String Beans's rough-and-ready performance of "Titanic Blues":

> Standing at full height, he reaches down to the keyboard as he sings like an early Ray Charles. . . . As he attacks the piano, Stringbeans' head starts to nod, his shoulders shake, and his body begins to quiver. Slowly, he sinks to the floor of the stage. Before he submerges, he is executing the Snake Hips . . ., shouting the blues and, as he hits the deck still

> playing the piano performing a horizontal grind which would make today's rock and roll dancers seem like staid citizens.[10]

Of course, no contemporaneous observer could have envisioned String Beans as "an early Ray Charles." If String Beans wasn't immediately recognized by his contemporaries as "the first great piano blues man," it was because when he first brought his shoulder-shaking "blues pianologue" before the African-American public, there was no one else to compare him to. No singularly identifiable blues voice was heard above the commotion until Butler "String Beans" May stormed the stage.

Also appearing at the Crown Garden Theater in May 1914 was soubrette Baby Mack, who received the following review under the heading, "Baby Mack—Some Baby":

> Yes, Baby Mack is some baby all right. She sings three delightful numbers, "Wait Until Your Daddy Comes," "When I Lost You" and "What It Takes to Make Me Love You, You've Got It." Her numbers stand for variety. Her second number is especially pathetic, touching. She sits down until the close, when she rises, going off the stage singing in a heartbroken manner the last lines.
>
> Baby Mack's closing number shows vivacity, shows that she is a performer already, and also that she is going to be among the top notchers. Her eyes, smile, steps are all indicative of her ability as a performer. The little lady has the stage essentials. She is pretty. She is versatile and knows how to look well. She will make a good number on any bill.

In the summer of 1914, String Beans took Baby Mack for his new partner. Opening at Cincinnati's Lincoln Theater, Beans and Baby Mack made "a strong combination. . . . They remind you of the days of Butler and Sweetie." Beans played a "straight role," "the dandy colored gentleman," and was declared "a 'whang,' as good in the neat as in the comedy."

When they reached Chicago, Sylvester Russell filed this self-fulfilling report:

> Since String Beans has improved by criticism, the lanky bewildering idol of unsuspected joy, has taken on a new coat of popularity and kept the house full at every performance. . . . For the first time in his history String Beans blossomed forth legitimately . . . and still made the house roar. He wore a white vest. I sat in a corner to take observations of his latest data, as Baby Mack fed him with a spoon full of crude cut questions.

From Chicago, Beans and Baby Mack headed south. They played the "81" Theater in Atlanta, while Bessie Smith, Bradford & Jeanette, Billy Zeek & Martha Copeland, and Coleman Minor all vied for attention on red hot Decatur Street. On July 13, 1914, they headlined the Grand Opening of the new Champion Theater in Birmingham. In the wake of these engagements a curiously irate letter was posted from Atlanta by Perry Bradford:

> I learn that Baby Mack was a hit in Birmingham last week. It's too bad such a clever little girl can't get with some legitimate performer, because the one she has is said to be the smuttiest in the business. When we can get to the place that we can get the audience without smut then we have an act. It's a foregone conclusion that we can't educate the theatergoers down here when we use smutty sayings. This class of performers have run down the best houses.

Bradford's real gripe was personal, not professional. After Bradford's letter appeared in *The Freeman*, Beans crowed:

> The big noise of vaudeville is at the Pekin theater, Montgomery, Ala. If we are to live ethiopia [sic] let us live by all means at this house. String Beans creates a riot . . . at each performance. It causes the police department to disperse the crowd. All the glasses were torn out by mad crowd and hundreds were turned away. On the bill with "Beans" is Jeanette Taylor, partner of "String Beans," who is good.

Jeanette Taylor was Perry Bradford's attractive, long-standing stage partner.

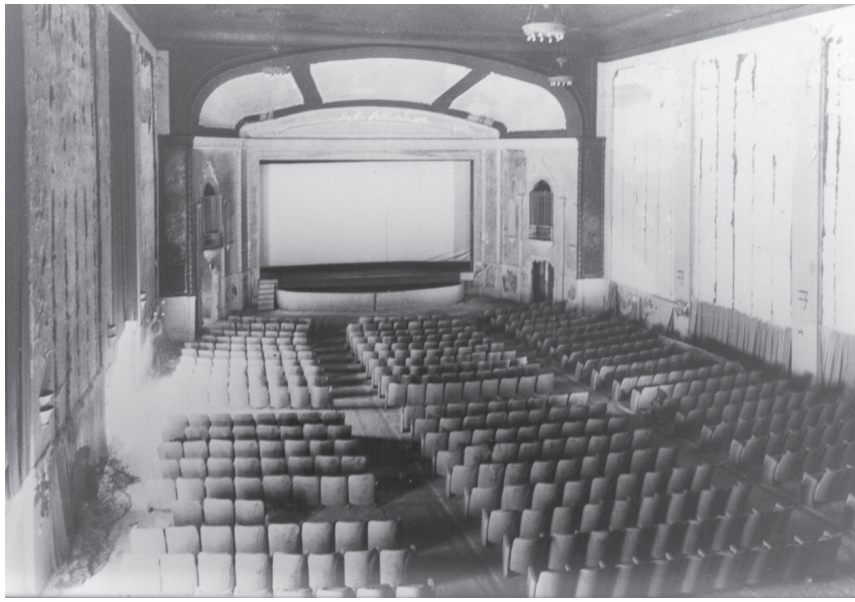

FIGURE 4 (ABOVE).
The Pekin Theatre of Montgomery, with a 1920s' renovated interior, photographed prior to demolition in 1991 by the Retirement Systems of Alabama to make way for an office tower. An entire block containing the heart of Montgomery's historic black business district was destroyed. (Photo by Robert Fouts, courtesy of the Alabama Historical Commission.)

FIGURE 5 (LEFT).
Exterior of the Pekin Theatre on Lawrence Street, 1991. (Photo by Robert Fouts, courtesy of the Alabama Historical Commission.)

Her association with String Beans lasted no more than a couple of weeks, but that was long enough to make a lasting impression on Bradford.

The sudden conclusion of Beans's and Baby Mack's partnership played out on the gossip mill. An anonymous *Freeman* columnist worked it into a soap opera:

> Baby Mack, a little St. Louis lady . . . a pleasing creature, very impressionistic . . . came near going into hysterics over "String Beans'" work, insisting on seeing him every night after her own turn, which was first. The Baby seemed to feel that it was a necessary adjunct to her enjoyment, because she would have me go with her and sit in the second row of seats, a place where I never before sat, nor since, to see "String Beans." And the little soul laughed so merrily and heartily that I quite envied Mr. Beans. It was her way of showing her attachment for him—strange, but very effective. And the many little things she would say about him and his work left no room for doubt her earnestness. They got together as a team before the week was over. And why not? He was her ideal. She was pretty, talented, young, vivacious, and alas crochety as geniuses are so likely to be—doing the unusual or "must" die. When last heard from, she was simply another one of the crushed hopes that have buzzed about Mr. May.

On Labor Day 1914 String Beans opened a return engagement at the Champion Theater in Birmingham. On the same bill were Muriel Ringgold and Ella Goodloe. One month later *The Freeman* revealed, "Mrs. Ella Goodloe has sued John Goodloe for divorce while playing in Birmingham. She is working with String Bean. Some act."

Beans was riding roughshod over vaudeville's female contingent; nevertheless, Ella Hoke Goodloe's divorce was probably coincidental to her new stage relationship with Beans. Quite a bit older than Beans, she had most recently been teaming with Viola McCoy.

In October 1914 String Beans and Ella Goodloe went to Chicago, made a two-week stand at the New Monogram Theater, then moved down State Street to the Old Monogram. Playing opposite Charles Anderson, "the Birmingham

tenor and yoddler [sic] and character artist who introduced Handy's 'St. Louis Blues.'" Beans and Ella were said to be "knockouts."

From Cincinnati in early-November came descriptions of "the one great String Beans and Ella Goodloe, the best entertainers of their kind in the show business, and as strong a drawing card as can be found." Beans's partnership with Ella Goodloe was short and sweet; they played their last dates together in December 1914, at the Metropolitan Theater in Memphis and, finally, at the Ruby Theater in Louisville, Ella's home town.

Meanwhile, Beans's estranged wife Sweetie had not slipped from public view. In January 1915, following an eighteen-month separation, Beans and Sweetie reconciled and set out to conquer the Northeast. At Gibson's New Standard Theater in Philadelphia, they put on a skit called "In the Hands of the Law," which "gave May and May opportunities to dance in their distinctive style and sing some new songs, assisted by piano specialties that were very effective." By one account, there was "hilarity without stint."

Next Beans and Sweetie invaded the legendary Lafayette Theater in Harlem. Lester Walton, co-manager of the theater and entertainment editor of *The New York Age*, was obviously relieved to see them give a "clean act":

> The chief item in this announcement extraordinary is not that "Stringbeans" is appearing at the Lafayette Theatre, but that "Stringbeans" is associated with a clean act. This piece of information will probably make many a theatregoer out in Chicago and in some cities in the Southland rub their eyes in wonderment, but it is really true—"Stringbeans" is doing a turn at the Lafayette which does not need fumigation . . .
>
> "Stringbeans" . . . is one of the biggest drawing cards playing in colored vaudeville houses. Heretofore his activities . . . have been confined in the most part to theatres in and about Chicago and cities in the South. His name has been synonymous with coarse, vulgar jokes, and in recent years so shocking have been some of his talk and songs that citizens have protested. . . . This wave of protest made him tone down his brand of entertainment slightly, but until he reached New York this week it can be truthfully said that the toning down process

was a most feeble effort.

> "Stringbeans" is doing a turn with his female partner under the name of May & May. The act is a riot. At each performance he proves himself an adept manufacturer of laughter, producing gales of it, and do not overlook this salient point—he is giving a clean act. "Stringbeans'" method of provoking laughter, somewhat unpolished 'tis true, is new to Harlem theatregoers, and he may be aptly described as a comedian who is original and who has a way of putting over jokes and songs peculiar to himself. His ability to play the piano serves him in good stead and his brief exhibition as a tickler of the ivories shows him to advantage.

The opinions of Walton, Russell and other critics had absolutely no bearing on Beans's popularity with his audiences. In the next week's *Age*, Walton conceded, "No act since the opening of the Lafayette Theatre has occasioned so much complimentary comment as 'Stringbeans.'" Indeed, Beans and Sweetie's initial impact in New York was as big as it had been in Chicago four years earlier. The critics attributed it to Beans's newfound willingness to tone down his act. If he wasn't exactly "legitimate," at least he was "clean." Walton made it plain that the Lafayette wouldn't have had it otherwise.

With a return date scheduled for May 1915, Beans and Sweetie left New York for more familiar turf—Chicago. Russell scoffed that Beans had returned to "give testimony of how his art has variated since his last departure":

> Beans told tedious stories of war which went into Biblical history. Then told how bad he is. He said that when he goes to bed the bed bugs cry for mercy and when he gets up he has to be polite to himself. Sweetie, whose limit of poses were "called" by Beans, was dressed in cream satin with a turban which had beaded tassels.

In March 1915 Beans and Sweetie began the trek back East. Show stops included the Lincoln Theater in Cincinnati and the Star Theater in Pittsburgh, where "String Beans was forced to take several encores on his own new song, 'Gabriel Has Blowed His Horn.'" In early April they played a return engagement at Gibson's Standard Theater in Philadelphia: "Mr. String Beans in the

past has borne the reputation of being suggestive. He is now in his fourth engagement and each engagement has meant three weeks at one time and a different act each week; and there has been not one joke or line that we have had to ask him to eliminate."

From Philadelphia, Beans and Sweetie took the Southern leg of Sherman H. Dudley's model East Coast theater circuit. When they arrived in Washington, D.C., it was reported: "There was never a man more welcome to a city than String Beans and Sweetie May. They opened Monday night to a packed house at the Howard and was greeted with a round of applause on their appearance. They took seven encores." During the course of the week, "Mr. Dudley took [Beans] out in his car and showed him Washington." Afterwards, Dudley confided to *The Freeman*, "I only wish we had more String Beans. He has proven to be the best box office card we have today by breaking all records everywhere he plays."

Proceeding to the Dixie Theater in Richmond, Virginia, Beans and Sweetie topped a bill which included the Three Hill Sisters. One of the Hill Sisters was Ethel Waters. This was probably the first time young Ethel encountered the incomparable blues comedian; she was so impressed that she appropriated his moniker, as indicated in this February 1916 communiqué from the Douglass Theater in Macon, Georgia: "The Hill Sisters are playing this house and making a big hit as usual. Mama String Beans is singing 'St. Louis Blues' and scores heavily."[11]

Beans and Sweetie's triumphant May 1915 return to Harlem was duly noted in *The Age*: "As an evidence of his drawing powers, May & May are in their third week at the Lafayette Theater, which is a new record set up for continuous booking at this popular house. Usually an act plays a split week—the first three days, or the last four days. To play the house for one week is the ambition of vaudeville turns."

Knowledgeable critics weighed in on Beans's latest conquest. Salem Tutt Whitney concluded:

> The original "String Beans" of the team, May and May, is a great hit in the East. His methods of provoking mirth are severely criticised by some people, but he is evidently giving the public just what it desires,

> as he is considered the best drawing card in colored vaudeville and that is all performers are expected to do—please the public.

Whitney offered some further observations in his "Seen and Heard While Passing" column of June 26, 1915:

> "String Beans" is an excellent delineator of the ignorant, funloving, obstreperous levee or cotton field darkey. He is innately funny with a magnetic personality. It is all unnecessary for him to resort to lines and songs overflowing with double, triple and sometimes quadruple entendre; but an unprejudiced jury would find his audiences accessory to the crime. "String Beans" serves the dish and they, the audience, eat it up with evident relish, so why lay the blame to 'Beans.' He possesses the physical requisites for a comedian; tall, lean, lanky, the personification of a bean pole, with elongated head, liberal mouth, full lips and ample pedal extremities. He seems to encounter no difficulty in being funny and none should envy him his wide popularity. "Sweetie," his partner, is an actress of ability, sings pleasingly and contributes largely to the success of Beans.

At the Standard Theater during the last week of June 1915, Beans and Sweetie put on "Percilla Johnson's Wedding," in which Babe Brown "agreeably surprised her many friends and admirers, by doing blackface comedy of the Topsy variety. Her mirth-provoking stunts were second only to those of the original 'String Beans.'" Also on the bill was the "clean, wholesome and refreshing" team of Frank Montgomery and Florence McClain.

It appears Frank Montgomery was a little too wholesome to suit String Beans. On July 31, 1915, Perry Bradford relayed a chilling report from Philadelphia: "Frank Montgomery, of Montgomery and McClain, is dead. He was severely cut by String Beans a fortnight ago." As it turned out, Montgomery's wounds weren't fatal:

> We are glad to know that Frank Montgomery is all right again. As we understand it, there was a serious mixup between him and String

> Beans. Beans slashed Frank with his carving implement, wounding him so seriously that he was laid up for a few weeks in the hospital. . . . The female members of the teams also became slightly implicated in the fracas the result being that Beans got a few gashes about the shoulders by one of them. It is not necessary to say who. The female members were Florence McClain and Sweetie May. Perhaps it would not be fair to the performers to publish the history of the affair, since it was unfortunate, and it might work them harm—some of them, at any rate.

Montgomery supplied *The Freeman* with his own tedious account of the incident:

> I am sorry that the whole thing occurred, but I know that I was in the right, as any one on the bill will tell you. It all started over me speaking to him about using profane language on the stage in front of ladies and he started the fight and I accommodated him. The only thing was I was fighting fair and he was using weapons.

Salem Tutt Whitney had been an "unwilling witness to the whole affair," which fell so plainly within the scope of his "Seen and Heard While Passing" column that he felt obliged to editorialize:

> The fracas was such as often happens between two men, overwrought and in a white heat of passion. The women were in nowise involved except as in the role of peace makers and the inconveniences they suffered as a result of their husbands' altercation was the lot common to all peacemakers. No one regrets the occurrence more than the principals. The affair was settled amicably between the two and the news was not even allowed to reach the daily white papers. Such occurrences work harm not only to those embroiled, but to the whole theatrical fraternity and we should be slow to give them publicity. As Shakespeare says, "The evil men do lives after them, the good is often interred with their bones."

FIGURE 6.
Stringbeans's Calling Card *(The Freeman*, November 20, 1915).

Butler May's personification of bad-ass "String Beans" seems to have exerted an influence over his darker impulses and appetites. In any case, the young theatrical genius was exhibiting dangerous proclivities: beating, cutting and fornicating his way across the black vaudeville landscape, while spreading his message of the real blues.

Following the incident with Frank Montgomery, Beans and Sweetie made a beeline south. Around the beginning of September 1915 they appeared at the Douglass Theater in Macon, Georgia, where house drummer H. Woodard took a useful inventory of Beans's latest line of blues songs:

> They open with a medley chorus consisting of "Walk Like My Man," and "I Wonder Where My Easy Rider's Gone." Sweetie May sings "Love Me or Leave Me Alone." She scores heavily with this. String Beans takes the audience almost off their feet with his own composition, "Low Down Jail House Blues." The way he touches the ivories makes anybody blue.

From St. Louis in October 1915, Beans notified *The Freeman*: "We expect to go east soon, but Sweetie needs a rest and will be going to her home in New Orleans Christmas for a three months vacation. I want a good capable female about Sweetie's color and size with talent enough to do my class of work; who will work during her vacation. I will pay $35 a week and guarantee no lay-offs.

Any one may write to me, care of The Freeman." Meanwhile, Beans and Sweetie moved on together to the Crown Garden Theater in Indianapolis, where:

> Beans was particularly good in his pianologue—altogether new, novel and original. . . . The song "I Loves My Man Better Than I Loves Myself," by Sweetie May, and "Don't Want Nobody That Don't Want Me," by String Beans, two rousing good numbers, were written by String Beans.

These two titles made their way onto 1920s Race recordings. Viola McCoy recorded "I Don't Want Nobody That Don't Want Me" in 1924, and Ida Cox recorded "I Love My Man Better Than I Love Myself" in 1923. The "better than I love myself" refrain is also prominently featured in "Any Woman's Blues," recorded in 1923 by both Ida Cox and Bessie Smith:

> I love my man
> Better than I love myself,
> And if he don't have me,
> He sure won't have nobody else.

Beans never had the song copyrighted, but his authorship is substantiated by a 1916 report from the Queen Theater in Chattanooga: "Billy McLaurin opened the vaudeville. . . . Mrs. Rennell Robinson, Memphis Coon Shouter, followed, singing String Beans' song, 'Love My Man Better Than I do Myself'"; and a 1918 report from the Palace Theater in Augusta, Georgia: "Bessie Brown sang one of String Beans numbers, 'I Love My Man Better Than I Do Myself,' which took the house by storms."

While Beans was at the Crown Garden, he had his new "calling card" reproduced in *The Freeman*. It bore his likeness, a smart head-and-shoulders shot in a stylish suit and hat, and his bluesworthy motto, "String Beans Been Here, Made His Quick Duck and Got Away." A brief message from Beans was attached:

> If we are to live in Ethiopia let us live by all means in the Crown

> Garden Theatre, Indianapolis. String Beans stretched forth his hands again this week in front of a large audience at each performance. His wife, Miss Sweetie May, the cleverest, neatest and best looking colored woman on the stage today, brings the audience to a feeling. . . . String Beans has purchased a big touring car and is seen nightly sailing through the atmosphere. Would like to hear from Frank Montgomery.

Fresh from recent triumphs, May and May headed back to the Lafayette Theater in Harlem to present the musical comedy skit "Josephine Spiller's Wedding" with support from an eighteen-member "High Life Set." "The sensational clarinet player, Wilbur Sweatman, was a scream on the same bill." Among those who witnessed the performance were modern dance idols Irene and Vernon Castle.

Shortly before Christmas 1915, Sweetie went back to New Orleans, while Beans remained in New York. He partnered briefly with Babe Brown and then with the great vaudeville blues pioneer Ora Criswell. Beans offered a "make-shift where he 'don't work wid chitterlings,'" while he and Ora did "some good singing and piano specialties; Ora Criswell . . . was seen in a shimmering silk that showed her shape to perfection."

For his next partner, Beans chose Ebbie Burton, who, as Little Ebbie Forceman, had started out singing and dancing in the rough-and-ready theaters of Dallas, where she was rated a "real 'coon shouter' from the fields of sugar cane."

On February 5, 1916, Beans again presented his "calling card" in *The Freeman*, along with a news update from Chicago:

> If we are to live in Ethiopia let us live by all means in the New Monogram Theatre. Stringbeans stretched forth his hands in front of a full audience. . . . His new partner, Miss Ebbie Burton, is a clever and neat little worker; sings her song, "I Love My Man Better Than I Do Myself" . . . Beans sits at the piano and sings and plays his own songs. The closing number is a scream. The "Blues" they play is called "Hospital Blues."

It seems String Beans never had any genuine desire to appear in mainstream vaudeville. It went against his credo: "If we are to live forever in Ethiopia . . . " He was the young lion of black theater entertainment for a black audience, the first national star whose fame and professional stature depended not at all on approval from the mainstream. Content to rule State Street, String Beans described his most recent appearance to readers of *The Freeman*:

> The old State Street Stroll was in its bloom . . . with all "headliner" acts at every colored theatre. The Smart Set at the Grand with Salem Tutt Whitney, Wm. Benbow at the Old Monogram. But it seems like String Beans was born with good luck stamped on his face. The amusement seekers of Chicago seem to think that String Beans only can cheer them up with his nonsense, when they are feeling blue.

It became increasingly clear that Sweetie May would not be traveling with Beans again any time soon. In February 1916 Beans announced that he and Ebbie Burton were "forming a four-act" with Will Benbow and his current partner, Robbie Lee Peoples. Robbie Lee had hooked up with Benbow just one month earlier, taking the place formerly held by Edna Landry Benbow, later known as Edna Hicks. The explosive new act debuted in St. Louis, then went to Louisville with an expanded troupe of eight people, under the banner of "Beans and Benbow's Big Vaudeville Review"—"not a stock company, but one of Bean's ideas. Each one does their act and then they all join Beans in his act, which lasts about thirty-five minutes. . . . All the songs used in this company are from the pen of String Beans."

Beans had expressed a desire to be in New Orleans for Mardi Gras, which fell on March 7, 1916, and perhaps he was able to squeeze in a brief "flying trip" before the Big Vaudeville Review opened at the Royal Theater in Atlanta. From there they went to Louisville, St. Louis, and Chicago. When they reached Indianapolis in August 1916, Beans's and Benbow's Big Vaudeville Review was fifteen members strong. *The Freeman* offered this succinct "Review of the Review":

> Opening—"Night Time in Dixie Land," followed by the "My

> Hero" song. Benbow leads chorus. Medley singing continues closing with "Dixie Land." Beans and Miss Benbow in "All Night Long," duo, concluding with the "Hesitation Blues." Beans's drill of the girls was a stand-out feature. The Benbow, Pellebone, Anthony and Beans mix-up was the nearest thing to a plot. The little snatches of songs by the girls now and then added cheerfulness to the whole. The "Walking the Dog" gave the company opportunity to please greatly. It is already a popular something, but done as the Beans and Benbow Company does it satisfies every bit of one's curiosity to see the amusing stunt.

"Walking the Dog" was the biggest "dance craze" song of the year. Apparently, Beans was something of an admirer of its composer, Shelton Brooks. Just before he committed to the Big Vaudeville Review, Beans told *The Freeman*: "Here I am with a nice clean act that the people of each town I play in turn out to see. With my pianologue—only two of us black-face comedians do it. Shelton Brooks and myself."

By the time the Big Vaudeville Review reached Indianapolis, Ebbie Burton was no longer a member. Beans partnered with Robbie Lee Peoples, now known as "Baby Benbow," who was singled out for her "vaudeville voice, the prettiest ever for singing her songs—the little queen of the blues or ragtime shouters." Beans was said to be "reaching the class of [Ernest] Hogan and [S. H.] Dudley, reminding one very much of Bob Cole in his seeming foolish simplicity. . . . And doubtless, if he keeps up the pace he will lead in some big aggregation if there are going to be any more big aggregations." In retrospect, the Beans and Benbow Review was the entrepreneurial high point of String Beans's quick, bright flash of a career.

When Beans's and Benbow's Big Review returned to Indianapolis in October 1916, Beans was teamed with Ethel Hudson, who "has a good stage personality and a pleasing voice for the kind of songs she sings. 'Walking the Dog,' with Beans, was a most pleasing feature of the show . . . String Beans, as usual, was the stellar attraction. . . . His comedy, monologue and blues renditions were joyously received, proving that the 'king' had lost nothing in the affection of his 'hearers.'"

This wasn't the first time that String Beans had been recognized as "the

king." In his column of October 14, 1916, Billy E. Lewis, one of *The Freeman's* most level-headed critics, called Beans "the blues master piano player of the world":

> Beans is rapidly developing into a comedian who will go anywhere. It must be admitted that much of his present popularity is due to his oddities, his eccentricities, differing wholly from anything ever seen on a public stage . . .
>
> At this time he has just what pleases colored audiences as we find them at colored playhouses. His strange comedy and his blues, especially when at the piano, create a furor. He will be readily conceded to be the blues master piano player of the world. That says very much. But one will not easily conceive of anything better of the kind. . . . I am not much on blues; don't think much of any variety of them. But if they are anything, Beans has got them.
>
> . . . As it is, Beans is now the best money-getter. He is known as the salvation man, the pinch hitter for the managers. He puts money in their pockets.
>
> Beans is yet a young man; really he is a boy, boyish in action when on the street. He has good common sense, and holds a good conversation; not stupid, as he appears on the stage. In fact he displays good art in this respect. He is so strong in his character that one expects to see him on the street as he appears on the stage. He is generous with his funds; some say too generous. At any rate this quality has made him many friends . . .
>
> He has plenty of good street clothes, and looks well when he has them on. He has a good-sized diamond in one of his gold teeth, as if a standing challenge to hunger.

The Beans and Benbow Review next appeared at the Booker T. Washington Theater in St. Louis, where, "They had to start the show at 6 o'clock Monday evening in order to handle the crowd. Five shows were given Monday." From St. Louis they proceeded to the Olio Theater in Louisville, and when they hit Cincinnati's Lincoln Theater in November 1916, the "police were called to

handle the crowd as traffic was really blocked." It was disclosed that Beans's and Benbow's present tour was being booked out of Chicago, "under Direction and Management of the Consolidated Vaudeville Exchange."

At Gibson's Standard Theater in January 1917, the "over-generous" bill opened with Irvin C. Miller's "ragtime revue" and closed with Beans and Benbow. Miller's review, a forerunner of his famous "Brown Skin Models," featured Esther Bigeou, Lula Whidby, Laura Bailey, and others, and was considered "some girlie show." However, the standing-room-only audience was said to be "essentially a String Beans aggregation."

Despite their obvious professional successes, String Beans and Will Benbow never managed to stay together very long. When they broke up their Big Review in early 1917, Beans returned to Chicago as a single. Sylvester Russell reviewed his new act in the March 17, 1917, edition of *The Freeman*:

> When Butler May, famously known as String Beans, stepped his foot on the Monogram stage platform last Monday evening, there was a wild roar of actual applause from an audience which completely filled the house to see what the greatest stage metamorphose known in history was going to do. . . . He was attired as a black-face sailor. He said that President Wilson had sent for him to join the navy, but he had made up his mind that he was not going to fight, and if he decided to do any fighting that he would fight liquor—that's all. He had one good song about some one was enticing him to steal, but he objected, and in his chorus he told that he is eating and sleeping, has good clothes and is satisfied. He said he had dined with President Wilson in Washington, but they dined in different places. He said he told Wilson in his interview that Uncle Sam was not his uncle, that his uncle's name was Abraham. He told of a trip to Mexico, where he went to interview Villa for the President. He said that when Villa found out that he was from America he turned a cannon on him and the cannonball chased him side by side across the border line back to the states, in Texas.

During his second week at the Monogram, Beans:

> entered as a working man with a dinner pail and shovel. He sang about his Hannah. She wanted nice dresses, so he went down to Siegel & Cooper's to get her some clothes at 3 a.m. and found that the watchman was still there. Then he talked about the stock yards. He said he was in the hog pen catching grunts and squeezing young hogs to death. He burlesqued Shakespeare. He concluded seated in a chair with his leather-toed feet up on a table, in the spotlight. Then he told about a railroad porter who lost his job because he was so dark that the man who hired a berth couldn't see him coming.

At the Washington Theater in Indianapolis the following week, Beans drew a strong review in *The Freeman*:

> The beauty of it is that he is good in his originality, saying things that produce a different kind of laughter, the kind that seizes one all over—makes you laugh until it hurts. He is just that humorous at times. He is wholly different to anything the race has produced. And if the managers will not overdo it by working him too often in one season he will ever be the salvation of playhouses, as he has been. The people want to see Beans—they must see him. They hunger for him. But he must not be crowded. His stock yards' stunt this week is a good example of his originality. He gave as many different shows as the times he appeared. He also rung in a variety of songs, some that his audience had never heard before. It was evident that Beans can not be pumped dry; he is a fountain. His piano playing is descriptive blues, and strictly a Beans' creation. Many try to imitate him in this respect, a sure proof of the quality of his work.

Before descending on Cincinnati's Lincoln Theater in April 1917, "where the announcement of his coming has already caused the selling out of the house for the first two performances in advance," Beans presented his *Freeman* calling card and announced, "Hurrah for String Beans, commander-in-chief of the army of fun and the real blues."

When String Beans played the Lincoln Theater, New York City, early in

June 1917, a *Freeman* correspondent bluntly reported: "To say that he carried the week at this theater would be placing it mildly, so we're coming out with the staggering truth by acknowledging that he was such a sensation that songs, actions and name are ordinary conversation in every other person's home." Of course, the reporter meant every other *black* person's home, but otherwise, his statement was no exaggeration. Young String Beans had attained the status of a cultural icon.

In July 1917 Beans signed on for another ride with Will Benbow, as a feature of C. W. Park's Colored Aristocrats, "at a salary of such magnitude that 'Beans' felt justified in canceling a long vaudeville route and accepting his office at once." Park's Colored Aristocrats were a particularly colorful variety show with a healthy representation of jugglers, roller skaters, and a "modern Sampson" who "lifts, unassisted, a 1,300 pound horse." They spent the rest of the summer playing towns in Pennsylvania. After only a couple of months, Beans left Park's Colored Aristocrats, probably when they appeared in Birmingham, during the first week of October. He immediately hooked up with the rising blues-comedy team of Jodie and Susie Edwards, who had just finished a long tenure with Tolliver's Big Show. The fateful trio made a short jump to Atlanta, as *The Freeman* of October 6, 1917 reported:

> String Beans opened the 81 Theater, Atlanta, and is packing them at every performance. Mr. Bailey will hold Beans over another week and then some more. Edwards and Edwards are with String Beans and they are cleaning up everywhere they go. They don't need any more acts on the bill as these are standing them in the streets nightly. Edwards and Edwards open and Beans closes with his piano. Nuff Sed.

From Atlanta, Beans made the familiar trek to Jacksonville. *The Chicago Defender* told of a "big week" in store for the Strand Theater there, "featuring the great String Beans and the sterling team of Edwards & Edwards."

String Beans was a primary influence on the development of the blues. In his heavy Southern vernacular style, his pianologue and piano dance, his repertoire of original songs and parodic inventions; in his license and abandon, both on and off the stage, String Beans personified the unadulterated instincts

FIGURE 7.
Butler "String Beans" May
(The Montgomery Emancipator,
November 24, 1917).

of the blues. But his creative influence, his material legacy and his legend were all checked in full career.

On November 10, 1917, bad news was posted from Jacksonville, in a letter from performer Hattie Akers to *The Chicago Defender*'s "Stage" column editor Tony Langston. Langston published the letter intact, warning that it "told of what may be, but what we hope will not be, the finish of one of the most unique characters in present-day show business." Following a bit of chit-chat about the summer-like weather in Jacksonville, Akers wrote: "I suppose you have heard about String Beans. He was being initiated into a lodge and in some manner they broke the small bones in his neck. He now lies in a hospital paralyzed from head to foot."

The tragic victim of an absurd "hazing" incident, String Beans languished for more than a week before the final curtain rang down on November 17, 1917. The great blues pioneer was barely twenty-three years old. His bizarre and untimely death was reported in several African-American newspapers. Beans's hometown Montgomery weekly, *The Emancipator*, ran his obituary on its front page: "[T]he world weeps with the friends and relatives of this comedian who now lies asleep in the little cemetary [sic] in his native home town. . . . His body was brought to Montgomery Monday the 19th inst., and was buried Wednesday at 2:00 o'clock P.M., the funeral services being held at Mr. May's home, 804 South Hall Street."[12]

Obituaries also appeared in Montgomery's mainstream dailies. The *Montgomery Times* reported:

> It is alleged that May's neck is broken and that rough places are about

> the head. It is charged that the man's death was due to the initiation at a Jacksonville lodge and a very great indignation is expressed here where he was popular with his race. His family employed an attorney today and no effort will be spared to bring to light the facts concerning his death. An effort was made at Jacksonville to suppress the real facts, one report having it that May was killed in an automobile accident in going home after the show. "String Beans" was the best known negro comedian in the south and was the highest-price negro showman in the country.

Sylvester Russell later revealed that the lodge where String Beans met his fate was "not the general Masonic fraternity, but an independent Masonic order, only of local recognition in Jacksonville, Fla. It is not generally believed that anybody had anything against the popular actor and it is not generally believed that anybody wants or wanted to get back at the secret order where the unfortunate accident happened. In conclusion and in behalf of secret orders, by the example shown in String Beans' death, colored orders have long been too rough in their initiations."

Butler May's death certificate provides the final word concerning the cause of his death. In the attending physician's nearly illegible script, it is attributed to a "Fracture of . . . 6th Cervical Vertebra of Neck." In the space marked for the deceased's former address, his sister Blanche May wrote, "Traveling Man."

Butler May was laid to rest in Montgomery's Oakwood Cemetery, in an inconspicuous tomb now shared by his mother Laura May, who died in 1941, and Blanche, who died in 1969. Country music legend Hank Williams is also buried in Oakwood, with an elaborate marker and memorial, about a hundred yards away from the May family plot.

For weeks after his funeral, African-American newspapers were crowded with eulogies and testimonials. Sylvester Russell's rambling eulogy in *The Freeman* included certain unique factual details:

> Sources who know String Beans intimately state that he was troubled with a spinal weakness, an ailment that was probably unknown to any persons outside of actors, much less members of fraternal orders. It is

> further stated he never rallied to come out of the comatose stupor alive. His mother and sister were sent for and according to another report, they were present at his bedside when he died.
>
> Butler May—String Beans—was . . . a comedian, all right, but the fact that he could not remember to do the selfsame thing over the second time compelled him to do any old thing similar he felt so disposed to do, and that alone was not only humor, but was excruciatingly funny to every eyewitness within his hearing, and his language was sometimes crude, but he came naturally by that, having been born in the heart-rending allies [sic] of the South . . .
>
> So poor String Beans is gone. And all his friends will mourn.

The Chicago Defender noted, "There probably was no better known performer to race vaudeville fans than Butler May . . . the Bert Williams of small time." Will Benbow, who had introduced him to the itinerant vaudeville life, flatly stated, "[T]here'll never be another 'card' like the original 'String Beans.'" Salem Tutt Whitney philosophized:

> If String Beans sinned, SO HAVE WE ALL OF US. We know he had his GOOD TRAITS, HIS VIRTUES. He was generous to a fault. HE WAS A GOOD FRIEND AND A POOR ENEMY. His mission on earth WAS TO MAKE OTHERS HAPPY. Thousands have forgotten their woes WHILE LISTENING TO BEANS.
>
> Can there exist a more COMMENDABLE OCCUPATION THAN THAT OF A JOY DISPENSER.
>
> "String Beans" was the BEST KNOWN PERSONAGE IN COLORED VAUDEVILLE.

Freeman columnist Billy E. Lewis provided a most thoughtful requiem:

> String Beans is now with those that have gone before—that long procession which in the end will include every man. . . . String Beans was a great character of his line. He was a low style of comedianism—near buffoonery—near clownish—yet the very fine art of crudenism. . . .

> He did not have to study his part to be proficient according to his conception of a role. He merely went on and it was in him to act—simply Beans. If they tried to tutor him he went to pieces. His 'genius' fled when they tried to keep him to his lines. No, he could not repeat, as Sylvester Russell says, and if he had been able, we would have had no String Beans. He was truly an oddity, a comedian, a curio, a monstrosity—a freak comedian. He pleased, but in his own inimitable way. He held his admirers to him as if by hooks of steel. They swore they would never see his monkey doings again, that they would have no more of him, but they did and again and again. He was a prince in generosity, never knowing the value of money. Managers too often took advantage of him when he was often enough their salvation and bank account. He was said to be at times cruel to women; it may be so, but he was fine among men. He could not spend his money freely enough on them. When Beans appeared at the social places for men it was a sign of the joy that would follow. He was tender of heart as I knew him. He spoke often of desiring to be a great star. He knew the value of his name, but I do not think he knew exactly why. A great character is gone from among us whether on stage or the street—joined the ages—a man and a brother.

String Beans didn't live to see his twenty-fourth birthday. When he first left home in 1909, blues music wasn't yet known by its rightful name. By November 17, 1917, when Beans made his last "quick duck" and got away, blues music had been adopted into American popular culture, largely under the authority of Beans's piano. African American press reports plainly mark his place in history as the first "blues king."

Butler May's name has been missing from the historical record for decades,[13] no doubt because there are no sound recordings of his piano or voice, and he never bothered to have anything copyrighted. He's suffered anonymity long enough. We hope he will rest in peace out in Oakwood Cemetery. ■

FIGURE 8.
Butler "String Beans" May's final resting place. (Photo by Joey Brackner)

Notes

[1]For information on pioneer "blue yodeler" Charles Anderson, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, "America's Blue Yodel," Musical Traditions, no. 11 (Late 1993), p. 8-11. For information on singer-pianist-composer "Baby" Seals, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," *American Music,* vol. 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996), p. 415-419.

[2]Doug Seroff interview with Joseph Nesbitt, Montgomery, Alabama, May 27, 1991.

[3]Seroff interview with Nesbitt.

[4]Black entertainment trailblazer William Benbow, who was also from Montgomery, recalled in a 1915 "Special to *The Freeman*" that he had given Butler May his professional start: "I [was] the first to take him away from home and put him in a small stock company in Pensacola."

[5]Notes from an unrecorded portion of Alan Lomax's Library of Congress interview with Jelly Roll Morton, as copied from the files by Bill Russell.

[6]For information on Fred Barrasso and his Tri-State Circuit, see Abbott and Seroff, "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me,'" p. 430-434.

[7]Will E. Skidmore and Renton Tunnah, "Pray for the Lights to Go Out" (Little Rock: Skidmore Music Co.), 1916.

[8]Docket #85099, Jefferson Circuit Court, Common Pleas Branch, Commonwealth of Kentucky. Thanks to Pen Bogert.

[9]Abbe Niles, "Notes to the Collection," in W. C. Handy, ed., *Blues: An Anthology* (New

York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1926), p. 43.

[10]Marshall and Jean Stearns, "Frontiers of American Humor: American Vernacular Dance," *Southern Folklore Quarterly,* vol. xxx, no. 3 (September 1966), p. 228-229.

[11]See Ethel Waters, *His Eye Is On the Sparrow* (1951) (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 75.

[12]*The Emancipator,* November 24, 1917. The May family residence at 804 South Hall Street, where the funeral was reportedly held, has since been demolished, the property absorbed into the campus of Alabama State University.

[13]One reverberation of String Beans's name in later blues history comes from Jodie and Susie Edwards. After performing with Beans during the final weeks of his life, Jodie and Susie Edwards "rededicated" themselves in his memory. They took the new name "Butterbeans and Susie" and enjoyed a lengthy career as recording artists and stars of the black vaudeville stage.

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Butler County Blues

Kevin Nutt

Unlike other areas of the South in the twentieth century, Alabama could claim no discernible style of acoustic-guitar-based country blues. The east coast Piedmont was characterized by the clean raggy finger picking of Buddy Moss and Blind Boy Fuller while Mississippi could claim both the buzzy slide technique of the Delta guitarists as well as the haunting Bentonia style of Skip James and Jack Owens. The number of recorded blues guitarists from Alabama pales in comparison to other states and areas. Still, the Alabama legacy includes a handful of intriguing stylists and performers. Marshall Owens, Tom Bell, Johnny Watson aka Daddy Stovepipe, and John Lee are a few of the recorded blues guitarists associated with Alabama. Geographical studies of the recorded blues indicate that the pattern and tendencies of record companies to recruit and record musicians only from certain areas meant that many talented musicians were never recorded. That certain areas of the South appear to have a preponderance of blues musicians or claim a certain playing style might be an inaccurate conclusion drawn from basing such assessments solely on the uneven documentation of the recorded blues legacy. Few commercial recordings were made during the 1920s and 1930s of African-American musicians in North Carolina and Florida, but we know through later field recordings that these states, especially North Carolina, had thriving blues traditions.[1]

Alabama's best case for a pre-war country blues scene was in the Greenville area of Butler County between the two world wars. It was here that the guitarist Ed Bell emerged, eventually recording twenty-eight songs released on a dozen 78s between 1927 and 1930 for the Paramount, QRS, and Columbia record companies. Eight of the sides were duets with the previously unrecorded St. Louis musician Clifford Gibson and Bell's fellow Alabamian Pillie Bolling; six

FIGURE 1

This Paramont publicity shot from 1927 is the only known photo of Ed Bell during his recording career. (Chicago Defender).

tunes recorded for Columbia were never issued and a reputed later Paramount 78, *Barefoot Blues/Hard Luck Blues,* has never been located.[2] But Bell's reputation as one of of the finest pre-war country blues artists largely rests on the first four recordings he made for Paramount.

Ed Bell was born in 1905 about five miles outside of Fort Deposit, Alabama, in an area the locals called Altonville. Bell's father was a farmer and when Bell was a young boy he moved the family to Greenville, about fifteen miles away. Greenville, the county seat of Butler County, was a major stop on the L&N railroad and the largest town in the area. As Bell grew up he gravitated to a group of musicians that congregated in the section of Greenville known as Sweet Gum Bottom. Of this group only Bell and Pillie Bolling would eventually record but at least the names are known of most of the others: Joe Pat Dean, Connie McKee, George Poole, Moses Smith, Baylor Bell and Katie Permer.[3] Not only was Permer a rare example of a female guitarist but she also ran a weekend party house or juke joint in Sweet Gum Bottom, a favorite haunt of these musicians. It's also interesting to note how close knit this particular Greenville area music community was. Joe Pat Dean was Bell's cousin. Another younger cousin, Baylor Bell, played guitar as well. George Poole who learned guitar with Bell, married a younger sister of Bell's, and Bell's older sister, Mary, married the guitarist Moses Smith. Before Ed Bell surpassed him, Bell's older cousin, Dean, was generally considered the best of the new-style blues guitarists in the Butler County area. George Poole remembered that after the fourteen-year-old Bell accompanied Dean on a trip to Muscle Shoals sometime in 1919, Bell returned with greatly increased skills.[4] Most likely, Bell had spent time in Greenville absorbing the styles, techniques and repertoire of the area musicians, probably practicing on the side, and his talent simply had finally manifested itself.

Joe Pat Dean led the life that myth and stereotype associate with the wandering bluesman. He was a womanizer, noted gambler, and pistol toter; he hated and avoided wage labor, balanced a healthy ego with an equal part jealousy, and died young and violently. When his protégé's skills surpassed his own Dean grew jealous and ceased traveling and playing with Bell. Probably particularly aggravating to Dean was that Ed Bell's signature tune, "Mamlish Blues," was Bell's version of Dean's "If I Could Holler Like A Mamlish Girl."[5]

The story of Dean's murder is well known in the Butler and Lowndes County area. Caught in the house of a girlfriend by an angry husband, Dean apparently chose to remain in the house completely trusting a chain and lock on the door. Unfortunately for Dean, the husband was able to insert a shotgun through a hole in the door, shoot and kill Dean. Another of the Greenville area guitarists, Connie McKee, had to flee to Mobile after a run-in with the local sheriff.[6]

Concomitant with the emerging acoustic country blues scene in Greenville was the existence of a by-then waning local black string band tradition. Greenville had not missed the guitar revolution that swept the South during the early part of the twentieth century and many of the younger musicians in the Greenville area were taking up the guitar and abandoning the fiddle and banjo. How much interaction occurred between the blues players and the string band musicians is not known. Intriguingly, by all accounts Ed Bell was also an excellent banjo player. Area residents interviewed in the early 1970s remembered several players including Dave Jameson and Zag Rudolph as musicians of an earlier string band or songster style.[7]

It is not known if Ed Bell was discovered by the noted Paramount scout Harry Charles himself or by an associate. Mary Bell Smith, Bell's older sister, claimed that a talent scout heard Bell playing on the streets of Greenville and promptly took him to Chicago where Paramount had a recording studio.[8] The doubt that Charles had a hand in discovering Bell arises from the fact that Bell recorded under his own name rather than a pseudonym. Charles almost always tagged his finds with such a moniker. Bell would, however, later record under the names Sluefoot Joe and Barefoot Bill for the QRS and Columbia labels.

Paramount has one of the more interesting and important stories of all the pre-war popular music labels. The parent company of Paramount formed as the Wisconsin Chair Company in Port Washington, Wisconsin, in 1888, grew rapidly, and by 1898 was worth $250,000 in capital stock. Because many early phonographs were sold with wooden cabinets the option of a company like the Wisconsin Chair Company branching out into phonograph production was not unheard of. The Starr Piano Company of Richmond, Indiana, owned the important Gennett label. QRS, with whom Ed Bell would record under the name Sluefoot Joe, manufactured piano rolls. Brunswick produced

FIGURE 2

The Paramount Ad for Ed Bell's initial Paramount Release. October 8, 1927 (Chicago Defender).

phonograph cabinets before they began to manufacture records, and the Okeh label sprang from a phonograph parts producing company. It was a logical step for Paramount and these other companies to begin to sell and eventually produce their own records to complement the sales of their phonographs. The Wisconsin Chair Company formed Paramount in 1917 as the The New York Recording Laboratories and the new label dived headlong into the lucrative record market of the prosperous post-war years. However, Paramount soon gained a deserved reputation for the poor-quality shellac of their records. Because of the cheap fillers Paramount used, even their freshly minted records were invariably accompanied by a loud background hiss during playback. Worse, Paramount was known to produce and ship completely unplayable records and to refuse returns. Coupled with the high costs of most phonographs and the reluctance of the public to purchase them in profitable numbers Paramount found itself one hundred thousand dollars in debt by 1922. With an inferior product and an inability to compete with larger record companies for "high class" talent, Paramount turned to an area avoided by the big companies, the so-called race market. By its final demise in 1932, this small company had recorded much of the most important African-American blues and gospel of the 78 era.[9]

Along with Bo Weavil Jackson (aka Sam Butler) and Walter "Buddy Boy" Hawkins, Ed Bell was one of the first country blues artists to record for Paramount, predating even the onslaught of the better known Mississippians like Son House, Tommy Johnson, Skip James and Charley Patton. Unlike other recording companies which often set up makeshift studios during field recording jaunts, Paramount required musicians to travel to their permanent studios. Arriving at the Paramount studio in Chicago in or around September 1927, Bell recorded four songs accompanied only by his guitar: "Mamlish Blues," "Hambone Blues," "Mean Conductor Blues" and "Frisco Whistle Blues." These are generally considered four of the finest pre-World War II country blues songs recorded.[10] This assessment is based upon Bell's dynamic vocal range and unique phrasing, and the deft integration of both with what Paramount advertised as Bell's "weird guitar" playing. In "Mean Conductor Blues," Bell extends the normal twelve-bar blues to fifteen and a half, squeezes extra vocal phrases into a line or extends a phrase into the next, and often unexpectedly

begins a verse. His guitar accompaniment is equally idiosyncratic including popping bass strings and almost atonal instrumental bridges between verses, as in "Frisco Whistle Blues." These characteristics give Bell's Paramounts a uniquely syncopated stop-start quality.[11]

"Hambone Blues" was remembered very well in Butler County and almost invariably referred to as Jelly Roll Blues because of the "Jelly roll, jelly roll, jelly roll is so hard to find" opening line. It features the same vocal and instrumental characteristics that distinguished Bell's first four Paramount records. The melody is, however, a variation on the traditional "Crow Jane" song. Many versions of this song were recorded during the 78 era, including Bo Weavil Jackson's "Pistol Blues" recorded by Paramount a year earlier in Chicago.

Much conjecture has been made about the meaning of the term "mamlish" that appears not only in "Mamlish Blues" but in several other Bell songs. None of the informants interviewed in the 1970s could offer an explanation. Henry Thomas, a life-long resident of Fort Deposit, Alabama, who knew Bell both as a bluesman and in his later career as a pastor, did not know the meaning of the word.[12] Blues researcher, writer, and collector Gayle Wardlow conjectured that it is a corruption of "man-ish" and was used as a somewhat derogatory comment on a certain woman.[13] The guitarist Pillie Bolling, with whom Bell later recorded, stated that since "Mamlish Blues" itself was originally a Joe Pat Dean composition the term might have originated with Dean or even predated him.[14] Most likely, mamlish, following the characteristics of slang, was a neologism, an in-word, used by a small close-knit group of people, in this case musicians, with, perhaps, a vaguely profane meaning. In any event, the joke is on the listener. Seventy-four years after Bell's promise to explain the meaning of mamlish in his very first recorded words, "Folks these is my Mamlish Blues / I'm gonna tell you just what they mean," they remain a mystery.

The adventure to Chicago, recording, the public attention, and seeing his records in stores no doubt encouraged Ed Bell to give up any notion of farming or wage work and solely pursue the life of the traveling musician. By the time of Bell's Paramount session in 1929 he had already been performing in the Greenville area for almost ten years and was playing in Montgomery on weekends. Soon Bell was traveling out of state into Ohio and Pittsburgh. At one point between the fall of 1927 and the spring of 1929 Bell was recruited by

talent scout Harry Charles and sent to Long Island City, New York, to record for the QRS label. Paramount reissued at least eighteen songs from the QRS race series and many from their hillbilly series.[15] Charles evidently was able to use some aspect of this relationship to arrange for Bell, dubbed Sluefoot Joe by Charles for this occasion, to record for QRS. Like Paramount, record production was a sideline for QRS. Their main product was piano rolls and phonographs. Unfortunately, QRS records were of even poorer quality than Paramounts and have proven even rarer to locate. The ones that have survived are often extremely noisy.[16]

For the QRS sessions, Bell was paired with the guitarist/pianist Clifford Gibson. Gibson was previously unrecorded but would record six solo performances, all issued, at these same sessions. Gibson would later record sixteen more sides for QRS and Victor, accompany famed hillbilly giant Jimmie Rodgers on Rodger's "Let Me Be Your Side Track," and continue his recording career until as late as 1960.[17] It was not uncommon in the 78 era for the companies themselves not only to pair up musicians for a recording session but to do so with last-minute notice to the musicians. Bell might have met Gibson during his travels of the previous two years; Harry Charles might have tipped off Bell that he would be recording with another musician or Bell might not have known about Gibson until his arrival in New York City.

Whatever the case, in or around June 1929, Ed Bell recorded eight songs for QRS. Only on "She's a Fool" did Bell perform solo and only on one other song, "Tooten' Out the Blues," did Bell even play guitar. "Shouting Baby Blues," "Grab It and Run," "Leaving Train Blues," "House Top Blues," "Rocky Road Moan," and "Rosca Mama Blues" are duets with Gibson playing guitar. These songs are fine blues but stylistically conventional, especially when compared to Bell's earlier Paramount's. Why the choice of Gibson over Bell is open to conjecture. Perhaps his cleaner, more measured style lent itself to the accurate and timely cues necessary for a guitar and vocal duet; perhaps QRS simply thought Gibson a more accomplished player and wanted to free up and emphasize Bell's obvious vocal gifts. Still, Bell's only solo piece, "She's a Fool," is a nice raggy workout and would eventually be covered by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. "Tooten' Out Blues" is the first of five reworkings of "Mamlish Blues" that Bell would record. Here, Bell plays guitar while Gibson accompanies on

piano. The tempo is slower than the Paramount "Mamlish" while the piano gives the tune a more familiar and urban sound.[18]

In the fall of 1929 Bell traveled to Atlanta to record for his third label, Columbia. This time Harry Charles gave Bell the recording name Barefoot Bill. On Monday, November 4, 1929, Bell recorded six songs for Columbia. Four would be released: "From Now On," backed with "Big Rock Jail," and "My Crime Blues," backed with "Snigglin' Blues." Two others, "Country Woman Blues" and "Having Fun Blues," were unissued. "From Now On" and "My Crime Blues" were yet two more re-workings of "Mamlish Blues."[19] Bell must have thought "Mamlish Blues" his strongest composition or best chance for commercial success since he never re-worked or borrowed the riffs from his three other Paramount recordings. "From Now On," in fact, actually became a hit with Columbia eventually pressing five thousand copies after its January 1930 release. Unfortunately, for Bell, his remaining recordings sold in increasingly much smaller numbers.[20] Of these initial Columbia recordings, "Snigglin' Blues" perhaps comes closest to catching the idiosyncratic exuberance of the Paramount recordings. Bell's vocals on "Snigglin' Blues" and "Big Rock Jail" are particularly powerful and effective with Bell using a thrilling end-line vocal vibrato throughout. Still, Bell's instrumental inventiveness and his interesting guitar fills are for the most part absent from these two tunes.

Columbia, spurred by the success of "From Now On" and apparently aware that Barefoot Bill was from the Greenville area, sent talent scout Dan Alby there later in the spring of 1930. There, Alby chanced upon Bell's friend and fellow guitarist Pillie Bolling carrying his guitar on the street. Bolling promptly took Alby to see Bell. It is not known if Alby knew Bell and Barefoot Bill were the same person. Alby might have been sent specifically to arrange another session for Bell and only decided later to listen to Bolling and others. Bolling, Bell and other local musicians auditioned for Alby that night and Bolling recalls, "they were red hot that night."[21] Bolling and Bell were chosen to travel to Atlanta later in the spring to record. If some of the other musicians in the audition included some of Bell's old unrecorded Greenville coterie such as Connie McKee and George Poole, then we know at least one observer thought Bell and Bolling the finer musicians and perhaps some of the frustrating speculation of the quality of the others' abilities can be somewhat alleviated.

Pillie Bolling was born in Butler County in 1905 and probably met Bell in Greenville sometime in the late teens. By the time of their recording session for Columbia Bell and Bolling had been playing together for at least ten years. Bolling would be the only other musician besides Bell from the Greenville area to record. They arrived in Atlanta in late April 1930 and recorded eight sides over two days; all were issued. The first two songs recorded, "I Don't Like That" and "She's Got a Nice Line," were similar raggy duets. Both tunes are simple workouts in the key of G with "She's Got a Nice Line" basically a rewrite of Tampa Red's and Georgia Tom's popular "Tight Like That." Bolling recalled Bell composing "She's Got a Nice Line" on a copy of the train timetable en route to Atlanta. In any event, both songs retain a bouncy, infectious humor.[22]

On the second day of the session, Bell and Bolling recorded six solo pieces. Bell recorded four and Bolling two. Like his earlier Columbia sides, Bell's new songs lacked the invention and embellishments of the earlier Paramounts. "Squabblin' Blues" was Bell's fifth reworking of "Mamlish Blues." While lacking the inspired instrumentation of the Paramount "Mamlish" it did feature an interesting and original nine-line lyric stanza inserted among the other four more common AAB blues stanzas. The other three, "Barefoot Bill's Hard Luck Blues," "One More Time," and "Bad Boy," rarely stray instrumentally from the initial tonic chord, but Bell's strong vocals almost make them winning pieces.

It wasn't until Pillie Bolling was located and interviewed by researcher Bengt Olson in 1975 that he realized that the two solo sides he recorded for Columbia were ever released. This is partly explained because Columbia waited until 1932 to release "Brown Skin Woman" and "Shake Me Like A Dog." Also recording at the session in Atlanta was the great Texas guitarist Blind Willie Johnson. Bolling borrowed and played Johnson's Washburn guitar for his recordings. "Brown Skin Woman" is a conventional blues performed in Bolling's two-finger style. If Bolling's vocals lack the power and range of Bell's, then his easy delivery and phrasing emphasizes a pleasing warm tone. Bolling's East Coast Piedmont-flavored style drew the appreciation of the noted old time musician Gid Tanner, also recording that day for Columbia. The shy Bolling declined a request from Tanner to join an after-hours jam session.[23] Bolling's other recorded tune, "Shake Me Like A Dog," is an unadorned raggy piece in

C, again featuring his likable vocal delivery.

Ed Bell would record again for Columbia eight months later in December in Atlanta. These would be Bell's final sessions. Of the six sides Bell recorded only two were released: "Carry It Right Back Home" and a remake of his earlier "She's a Fool" for QRS, as "She's a Fool Gal." Bell uses fingerpicks on both these raggy songs. Consequently, his playing is clearer and more articulate but once again lacks any distinctive embellishments.

Speculating from the titles alone of the four unissued sides, "Drunk Spell Blues" and "Starvation Moan" would appear to be blues compositions and "She Can Use That Thing" a rag. Perhaps anticipating Bell's imminent conversion, "You've Got To Hand It Up To Him" could be a religious song revealing a growing occupation with the spiritual. Sometime in 1933 Bell decided to put up his guitar and yield to the call to the pulpit. He would remain a successful pastor in the Greenville and Montgomery area for the remainder of his life. Bell would not have been alone among bluesmen who recorded both sacred and secular material. Charley Patton and Skip James recorded both blues and spirituals and James also would later become, among other occupations, a pastor.

By 1933 with the Depression in full swing and discouraged by the low sales of his records, Bell began to lose interest in performing. Perhaps this is hinted at in the lyric to "Squabblin' Blues." Bell requests "if he should die in the state of Arkansas" for his survivors to either claim and keep his body or "cast it into the sea." He ends the song with the stanza: "Sayin' I won't be worried with these blues no more I say / Say it's train time now, said I reckon I better go." ■

This is the first of a two-part article. The second part will cover Ed Bell's life as a pastor.

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[2]Robert M. W. Dixon, et al., *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943 Fourth Edition.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 50.

[3]The notes to Mamlish Records 3812 *Barefoot Bill's Hard Luck Blues* lists the name as Kate Pertum.

[4]Stephen Calt, Don Kent, and Michael Stewart, liner notes to *Ed Bell's Mamlish Moan* (US: Mamlish Records S-3811).

[5]Calt, *Mamlish.*

[6]Interview with Henry Thomas, Fort Deposit, Alabama, September 17,1998.

[7]Calt, *Mamlish.*

[8]Calt, *Mamlish.*

[9]Stephen Calt, "The Anatomy of a Race Label." *78 Quarterly* (Vol.1 No.3): 10-23.

[10]Calt, *Mamlish.*

[11] Calt, *Mamlish.*

[12]Henry Thomas.

[13]Gayle Dean Wardlow, in conversation, May 2001.

[14]Calt, *Mamlish.*

[15]Dixon, xxxvii.

[16]Dixon, xxxvii.

[17]Dixon, 297.

[18]Ed Bell, *Ed Bell (Barefoot Bill, Sluefoot Joe) Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order 1927-1930* (Vienna: Document Records DOCD-5090), compact disc. This CD also includes Bell's two duets with Pillie Bolling as well as Bolling's two

issued solo pieces.

[19]Dixon, 50.

[20]Pat Conte, Don Kent, Bengt Olson, Gayle Dean Wardlow, liner notes to *Barefoot Bill's Hard Luck Blues* (US: Mamlish Records S-3812).

[21]Conte, *Barefoot Bill.*

[22]Conte, *Barefoot Bill.*

[23]Conte, *Barefoot Bill.*

Tracking Down a Legend: The "Jaybird" Coleman Story

James Patrick Cather

It was the summer of 1962. August. Birmingham was at the outset of its full-fledged movement days. Suspicion and fear were high on both sides of this city's racial fence. And there I was: a fresh-faced kid traveling in and out of Birmingham's older black neighborhoods, tracking down the legends and folk-heroes of our earlier, classic jazz and blues era—names like Frank Bunch, Robert McCoy, Lucille Bogan, Dave Miles, Blind Charlie Barker, and others. Many were dead, even in the sixties, having had their day of glory forty years before; but enough were still around to make the effort worthwhile, at least to a wide-eyed white kid.

Sure, I was scared. And not of the black folks. After all, Robert McCoy's house—which was a sort of headquarters for my efforts—was only one block away from Arthur Shores's home and I had lost track of how many times Lawyer Shores's house had been bombed. But somebody had to get out and track down the bluesmen and jazzmen (**and** women) before all of them were gone. And the then lily-white Southern history departments in our local libraries were certainly not going to dirty their hands with the effort. After all, this **was** 1962 and this **was** Birmingham. Southern history ~~departments in university and public libra~~ries were extensions of polite white

society. And polite white society might listen to and enjoy a black musician on the bandstand at the Birmingham Country Club but was not about to interview that musician with a tape recorder! The work of the Lomax family and of Alabama's own Ruby Pickens Tartt notwithstanding, most of these institutions probably had no inkling of what oral history was! And "Black History"—for them—began with Booker T. Washington and ended, safely, with George Washington Carver. If any of this history and great music was to be preserved, it was up to this "kid."

I did have some help. "Fess" Whatley was the starting point for any research into Birmingham's black musical past. I was fortunate to meet him early on. Folks tend to forget that Fess, in addition to being a great musician, was also a printer of some note. My grandfather had been in the printing business here since the turn of the century and he and Whatley were good friends. Our firm often did typesetting for Whatley and he, in one of his two big black Cadillacs, would pull up in front of the office at least once a week. Fess (and, later, Frank Adams and Ivory "Pops" Williams) was a tremendous help to me in tracking down the jazz greats that were left. He was not, however, as great a help with the much more obscure country blues singers. There had been, in the past, little mixing between jazz musicians and the guitar-playing, harp-blowing country blues singers.

Support in that regard came primarily from outside the state: from up north and from England, in fact, where the seeds of a real blues revival were being sown. At the forefront of this movement were authors and folklorists Sam Charters and his wife, Ann. In that summer of 1962, the two of them were in my living room, seated at the grand piano playing Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton tunes. Sam had just finished his second book on the blues and Ann was working on her biography of Bert Williams. In fact, that was the reason for this visit as she wanted to use some of my Williams sheet music collection to illustrate her soon-to-be published book. Well, this was heady stuff for a teenager. As the visit progressed, I mentioned to Sam the difficulty I was having in locating some of the great oldtime blues singers from the area.

"Well, 'Jaybird' Coleman's brother still lives in Bessemer. Why don't you look him up? I talked to him very briefly last year but didn't have time to really interview him."

With that valuable bit of information, I was on the trail of Alabama's legendary contribution to the blues. Within a week, I was sitting in Joe Coleman's house in a modest black neighborhood in Bessemer. Joe had no idea that among young white blues enthusiasts, his brother was a real legend. Even then, Jaybird's Gennett records were selling (if and when they could be found in decent condition) for $25 to $50 each (in 1962 dollars). Lord knows what they're worth now.

Jaybird was born Burl Coleman in Gainesville, Alabama, in 1896. His parents were sharecroppers and he, along with Joe and their two brothers, led the typical hard early life.

But working in the fields, probably alongside former slaves, Coleman must have heard and absorbed the Negro folksongs and field cries that were the living remnants of slave days. These early influences were apparent in those magnificent Gennett recordings of the 1920s.

When Burl was twelve, his uncle gave him an harmonica. He had found his instrument—the perfect complement to his rough-hewn vocal style.

FIGURE 1.
Jaybird, at Ft. McClellan, Alabama, during World War I.

While stationed at Ft. McClellan during the First World War, he would often entertain fellow soldiers with his singing and playing. It was also at McClellan where his independence and disregard for army regulations earned him the nickname of "Jaybird." The name stuck.

After the war, he and his brother Joe settled in Bessemer, where both would live the rest of their lives. He gained a local reputation as an entertainer and was popular with both white and black audiences. According to

what his brother told me that summer, Jaybird was always able to earn a decent living as a blues singer and would never have another livelihood.

Early on during his life in Bessemer, Jaybird married his wife, Irene. Though firmly associated with an art form considered by many to be "the devil's music" he and Irene attended church regularly and it must be presumed that black spiritual music also heavily influenced his personal blues style.

By 1925, according to Joe, Jaybird was known in every black neighborhood of Bessemer and Birmingham as "the Pied Piper of the Blues" because he would play his harp as he walked down the street and invariably he would be followed by a crowd of adults and children. Jaybird had no surviving children of his own.

My host said his brother was indifferent to money and never held onto it for long, even when times were good. Joe quoted him as saying, "I want to get rid of my money as soon as I get it because if I died with money in my pocket, my wife might spend it on another man!" Yet whenever he performed at a club, a party, or a barbecue, he'd set his big derby hat down beside him and in an hour or two, it would be overflowing with tips.

Unlike many blues singers of legend, Jaybird was not a heavy drinker but he did like to smoke big, expensive Cuban cigars.

In July 1927 Coleman began his brief but important recording career, making several sides for Gennett Records at the old Starr Piano Company, 1820 Third Avenue North in Birmingham. These first sides, including "Mill Log Blues," "Mean Trouble Blues," "Ah'm Sick and Tired of Tellin' You (To Wiggle That Thing)," "Black Mule Horse Blues," and "Clouds Done Got Darkened—B'lieve It's Gonna Rain" (the last two as duets with R. D. Norwood), remained unissued at the time but must have shown promise because in August he was back at the Starr Piano company for more recordings. This second session was more successful and the following sides from it were issued as records: "Mill Log Blues," "Boll Weevil," "Ah'm Sick and Tired of Tellin' You," "Mean Trouble Blues," and the great classic, "Trunk Busted—Suitcase Full of Holes." In addition to being under his own name on Gennett, two of these titles were also issued by another label under the pseudonym "Rabbits Foot Williams."

A spiritual, "I'm Gonna Cross the River of Jordon" (sic), recorded two

days later, was issued only under the pseudonym. A week later, on August 11, he was again in the makeshift local studio and on that occasion recorded "You Heard Me Whistle," "No More Good Water," "Mistreatin' Mama," and "Save your Money—Let These Women Go." Finally, two weeks later, he made two more sides of harp (*i.e.*, harmonica) solos, neither of which was released at the time. According to *Blues & Gospel Records 1902-1942* by Robert Dixon and John Godrich (Middlesex, England: 1963), he would not record again until 1930 and then only briefly.

These early recordings consisted in some cases of only Coleman singing and accompanying himself with harp as he finished each vocal bar. On a few others, there was added guitar accompaniment by the previously mentioned R. D. Norwood. It was about as primitive a blues style as one could find in the 1920s: a style, at least in Coleman's use of it, that is held in very high regard by blues critics and commentators from the 1960s revival years until the present day.

Joe told me that his brother never got more than a pittance for these records, even though they were quite popular. It's the same old story and one that we still hear today with regard to the black pioneers of rock and roll of the fifties and sixties. History does seem to repeat itself.

The recordings did, however, serve to enhance his reputation and, strangely enough (Joe discussed this only reluctantly), the Bessemer Ku Klux Klan began acting as Jaybird's manager and arranged for him to tour the larger Southern cities. Soon after his return to Bessemer, he and some other local musicians, notably "Bogus" Blind Ben Covington (a blues singer who faked blindness, as his name implies) and Dave Miles, formed the renowned Birmingham Jug Band.

In 1930, at the depth of the Great Depression, Coleman, along with young blues pianist Robert McCoy, took the train to Atlanta to try to revive Coleman's recording career. On April 22, the two recorded "Coffee Grinder Blues" and "Man Trouble Blues," with Jaybird singing and playing the harp while McCoy (who later would have a career of his own and who would be elected posthumously to the Birmingham Jazz Hall of Fame) accompanied on piano. The format was somewhat of a change from the earlier recordings and the record did not sell well. Joe told me that no more than fourteen hundred

copies were pressed, if that many, because of a disagreement between his brother and the recording company. The record's extreme rarity because of this is to be mourned because Joe declared that "Coffee Grinder Blues" was Jaybird's favorite and best number.

Coleman made one more trip to the recording studios in Atlanta in December of 1930 as part of the Birmingham Jug Band. In two different sessions, that group recorded their classic sides, "German Blues," "Canebrake Blues," "The Wild Cat Squall," "Bill Wilson," "Getting Ready For This Trial," "Givin' It Away," "Kickin' Mule Blues," and the aptly titled "Birmingham Blues." These sides were issued on four Okeh records in 1931. Neither Coleman nor the Birmingham Jug Band would enter a recording studio again, to my knowledge. (In 1963, I **did** make some tapes of original Jug Band member Dave Miles. These were never released.)

The country blues styles lost favor in the middle thirties because of changing musical tastes of an increasingly urbanized black population. Further, the rural blacks who remained in the south were made even poorer by the depression and phonograph records were not high priorities in their budgets even though they still appreciated earlier musical traditions. They just continued to play their older records until the discs were almost worn out (which explains why older blues 78s are seldom found in good condition).

Coleman continued to be popular locally and found plenty of work in the Bessemer and Birmingham area, according to Joe. Sometimes he worked alone and sometimes with the Birmingham or other "jug" or "skiffle" bands.

Early in 1950, Jaybird became ill. His brother took him to the Negro ward of a local hospital, but the singer died before he was even admitted. I inferred at the time that Joe did not particularly want to talk about his brother's death. He did tell me that Jaybird was buried in Bessemer's Lincoln Memorial Gardens with a veteran's tombstone. Sometime after my visit with Joe, I was able to find the grave and photograph it. Joe's delightful wife, Lizzie, owned the only known photograph of "Jaybird" taken at Ft. McClellan during the First World War. I purchased the rights to the photograph from her and printed it as part of a copyrighted story in the September 1962 issue of *Music Memories*. When I reread the article to prepare this booklet, I was privately embarrassed at how bad the writing was (and, in one or two places, how the article bordered on

the patronization which passed for racial "moderation" in 1962 Birmingham). But I **was** just a fresh-faced kid.

That was twenty-eight years ago. There was no archives department at the local library; there was no Birmingham or Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame; there was no Alabama Music Hall of Fame Museum in the Tri-Cities. Just a kid, tracking down a legend. And trying to build a bridge between black and white. ■

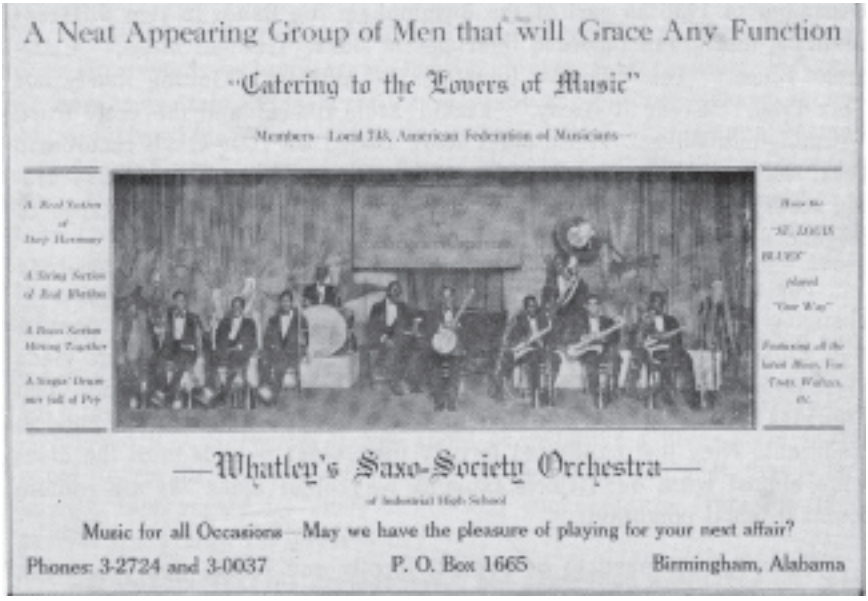

FIGURE 2.

"Fess" Whatley (far left, ca. 1920s) was the starting point for my research into Birmingham's black musical heritage (from author's collection).

A Life of the Blues

Willie Earl King

I was born March 18, 1943, in Prairie Point Mississippi. A community called Greene Hill. Macon, Mississippi, the county seat. We were sharecroppers. Living on a plantation we were poor but we had plenty love for each other. People would come miles to help with the sick, willingly to help anyone they could. That was real love, and everyone was your parents. People are missing that kind of love; love is badly needed today. I started trying to play the blues when I was eight years old. I would get old baling wire and wrap around old broomstick that was my guitar. I played until I got that feeling to play the blues, here I am.

My first blues band, I trained several guys from the community, Jerry King, drummer, (deceased). Lewis Cowt, bass. I made my first debut forty-two years ago. What we call country blues juke house. We had kerosene lamp light. I watch the reactions of people when I started to performing how people would dance mingle sing and put their hands together, most of all how they loved each other. My grandparents taught me to live a blues life. The blues was sent down for oppressed people to ease their mind, not just for music, the love that goes along with it. The blues have worked miracles for me and many people. I have met many kinds of people during my tour of blues.

I met Mr. Albert Duck fifteen years ago, old blues musician from Prairie Point, Mississippi, near Macon, Mississippi. I was nine years old when my grandparents talked about Mr. Duck, how Mr. Duck and his brothers have people dancing; oh how my grandparents would laugh. When I got the pleasure to talk with Mr. Duck he told me about when his brothers and himself played the blues for my grandparents at their house people would come miles walking, riding mules, and sometimes landowners would bring people to hear the blues.

My mother was fourteen years old at the time Mr. Duck was playing for my grandparents. He told me about my mother. She would be standing side the walls of the house watching him play the blues and sing the blues. She loved to watch him play the guitar and dance.

Mr. Duck told me my mother would often say "I pray that one day I would have a son or daughter who would learn to play the guitar, sing the blues most of all live a blues life." So here I am, Walking that walk, Talking the talk, Strolling with the blues, I AM THE BLUES.

Today I have a great band that I have trained; being a blues musician for forty-two years means you live the blues life everyday. The blues mean sharing, express how you feel and most of all the greatest gift of all LOVE. I am struggling to carry the blues on. I been talked about, laughed at, made fun of, mistreated, and misunderstood. Still holding to something I believe in helping people to express their feeling it is good for the soul and a peace of mind. I am passing down from generations what I learned as a little boy preserving jelly from wild plums and berries. Making sweet potato pies with my family.

The blues is making a strong comeback, with the old as well as the young people. When I put on a concert I see all walks of life, coming together as a unity. I am thankful for what impact the blues have on the younger generations. A gentleman named Travis Hodges sixteen years old is taking the blues on. Travis has trained two young men to play instruments and sing the blues. Travis is in process of starting his own band, putting his best foot forward ready for the future generation. I recall the first time Travis saw me perform four years ago Travis walked up to me introduced himself and told me he this what he wanted to do: play the blues. I took Travis under my wings. He was a fast learner. He was determined he would play the blues someday. Travis is now playing the blues with Willie King. King says the blues will always be a part of my life. Through my struggle of ups and down. I will never depart from the blues for all the silver and gold in the world. The blues have healed me spiritual and mentally. When I am feeling down the blues gives me hope. I recall plantation days, cotton, hayfields, and sawmill we always had the blues when there was no money. I recall the old house we lived in. Winter months it seem as though we would almost freeze we kept the faith and the blues close at all time. In closing I don't worry about material things and fame. I AM

THANKFUL MY GLORY LIES AT THE ROOTS OF THE OLD DAYS. I AM THE BLUES, YESTERDAY TODAY AND TOMORROW. ■

Editor's Note: A companion photographic exploration of juke blues by renowned blues photographer AXEL KÜSTNER appears in the insert toward the center of the issue.

Livingston, Alabama Blues: The Significance of Vera Ward Hall

Dr. Jerrilyn McGregory

At the height of the wholesale commodification of blues music by recording companies, John Lomax (named the Honorary Consultant and Curator of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress) and his wife, Ruby Terrill Lomax, arrived in Livingston, Alabama, to document the locale's folksongs. By 1937, the Lomaxes had struck up a life-long relationship with a locally renowned folklorist, Ruby Pickens Tartt. After stints in South Carolina, Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, the Lomaxes visited Livingston to partake of Tartt's treasure trove of local artists. According to John Lomax's fieldnotes, Tartt alternately served as their "hostess and informant and referent."[1] As their referent, Tartt introduced them to her county's finest singers and musicians.

Ruby Pickens Tartt attracted John Lomax's attention as a fieldworker for the WPA. During the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project provided a livelihood for many now-famed writers and scholars, such as Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. According to Lomax biographer Nolan Porterfield:

> As $56-a-month local field-worker for the Writers' Project ("chairman" of its Sumter County operation), Mrs. Tartt was one of those who had answered Henry Alsberg's call for folklore material and so inundated the project's Washington office that Lomax had to be called. Once he spotted the rich variety of rare Negro songs and stories from Mrs. Tartt, he quickly set about arranging to visit Livingston with a recording machine.[2]

The repertoire of the singers in this area contained amazing breadth.

It became the representative locale for their Alabama recordings, where the Lomaxes collected numerous genres of African American folksongs, including lullabies. Ultimately, over a four-year period, the Lomaxes collected 305 folksongs there. After the first site visit, John A. Lomax reported to the Library of Congress that they netted 104 tunes, with little overlap. John Lomax indicated that "Most of our songsters around Livingston are Negroes. In fact we rarely think of trying to find folk songs among white people, so rich are the Negro sources."[3] However, Livingston's star singers Doc Reed and Vera Ward Hall expressed dismay about singing secular songs, especially blues tunes.

From an early age, Vera Ward Hall worked as a domestic servant. Hall was born circa 1906 on a small farm near Livingston, Alabama, to parents who encouraged her singing. Moreover, she grew up surrounded by a large, musically endowed community. Hall, along with her cousin, Dock Reed, were the first singers whom Tartt chose to introduce to the Lomaxes. Lomax indicated in his fieldnotes: "When I could get Vera away from Dock I could persuade her to sing 'sinful' songs."[4] Her repertoire acknowledges her as a tradition-bearer grounded in all forms of African American music.

Power relations dictated that African Americans be subordinate to whites and do their bidding without question. Then, too, a certain paternalism characterized what circulated as a white liberal approach to race relations. Much evidence suggests, nonetheless, that Tartt and the Lomaxes provided a protective site in which African American folk artists could express much about the social injustice they experienced. Hall's repertoire included several blues ballads: "Another Man Done Gone," "Railroad Bill," and "Lazarus." These ballads feature the badman folk cultural hero. Folklorist David Evans defines blues ballads as "narrative folksongs that tell a story in a very loose, subjective manner and tend to 'celebrate' events rather than relate them chronologically and objectively in the manner of other American folk ballads" (44). These tunes offer a furtive look at Southern apartheid and the harsh reality of its penal system. The songs also examine the subversive side of African American life. As Alan Lomax later indicated, "African Americans in the Deep South do not gossip freely with white men about such matters."[5] It speaks volumes about

FIGURE 1.
Vera Hall (Photo by Harold Courlander, reprinted by permission of Michael Courlander).

Lomax's interpersonal skills that Hall elected to record them for him.

Perhaps insights into John Lomax's fieldwork methodology can be gleaned from his fieldnotes. He initiated the recording session by first playing recent recordings from Parchman Prison in Mississippi. He then asked Hall specifically whether she knew "Railroad Bill." As Lomax attested:

> While Vera Hall seemed to be as devout a Christian as Doc Reed, her cousin, and sang the old spirituals with as much sincerity and feeling, yet she did not refuse to sing secular songs that she had learned from her mother, her husband—at this time in the penitentiary—from Richard Amerson, and especially from "Blind Jesse" Harris. . . . We would say, "Vera, do you know (for instance), 'Railroad Bill'?" And Vera would reply, "No, sir, I can't say dat I knows it. I used to hear Blind Jesse sing it." "How did it go, Vera?" "Le's see. I don't knows as I can put it together." But a gleam of remembrance would come into her eyes, she would shift her feet, throw her head back, open her mouth and throat, and out would come "Railroad Bill is a mighty bad man, I'm skeered o' Railroad Bill" and away she would go.[6]

Although she never sang such songs for an audience, to our benefit she would comply with the Lomaxes' coaxing.

As indication of the lasting impression Hall engendered, of all the African American singers recorded by the Lomax family, Alan Lomax documents her life history in his *The Rainbow Sign*. Using the pseudonym Nora to present her oral history, Lomax described her vocal skill: "It is a liquid, full contralto, rich in low overtones; but it can leap directly into falsetto and play there as effortlessly as a bird in the wind."[7] No doubt another fictitious name, Rafe Addison, is the man Hall identified as her mentor, "the one I learnt all my best songs from" (60). Although a roustabout, itinerant worker, Hall's family encouraged his visitations to their household where he entertained them by singing blues into the night. According to Hall, her parents "would laugh and tell us, 'If you all keep on listenin to Rafe, the devil gonna get you, 'cause old Rafe is almost Satan on earth.' Father would laugh and laugh and say, 'he's all right. He keeps you company, even if he do study so much devilment. Got all

my chillun singin the blues'" (63).

The blues as devil's music is a recurrent motif in blues scholarship. Musicologist Jeff Titon sums up one prevalent blues mythology in his book *Early Downhome Blues*:

> Once the learner had an instrument, he approached the skilled musician for help. The expert, like the devil which Tommy Johnson saw at the crossroads, showed him how to tune it and how to accompany songs. Usually there was no singing instruction (40).

Hall's family asserted that Addison served in this capacity for Hall. However, their laughter supports theorist Jon Michael Spencer's contention that true blues people were not dichotomous: "[The Devil] is both malevolent and benevolent, disruptive and reconciliatory, profane and sacred, and yet the predominant attitude toward him is affection rather than fear" (11).

After singing "worldly" songs for the Lomaxes, however, Hall had to stand her ground and verbally defend herself before a church community that traditionally could be unforgiving about such transgressions. In these rural Southern communities, Christians adhered to strict church discipline against dancing, swearing, and singing secular tunes. One could be "handled"—that is expelled by church members—for the slightest infraction. Hall later expressed:

> I told those old deacons the truth, say, "I did sing the blues. I give um the words and showed them how the tune went—just tryin to do what I was asked to do' but that didn't have no effect on my religion."[8]

In such a setting, the censure would be the same for a man or woman who broke with the church community's tenets. But why did Hall and not Reed elect to withstand their scrutiny?

On the one hand, Doc Reed never relented. Despite John Lomax's cajoling, Reed recorded some seventy-two versions of songs for him, but he never really deviated from singing anything except the spiritual. The same holds true twenty years later when he recorded at least a dozen songs for Harold Courlander. With the exception of three songs from a brief recording session in 1937, Reed

usually sang accompanied by Vera Ward Hall. Their duet selections, "Moanin (I'll Soon Be Done)," "Job, Job," "Didn't That Hammer Ring," and "What is the Soul of Man" contain many elements associated with the oratorical style of African American preachers and churchgoers. On the other hand, Hall's family socialized her to accept life's ambiguities. As Hall avers in *Rainbow Sign*, she went through a phase when "I wasn't goin to church, and I got to thinkin how my mother always told me that religion was never designed to make your pleasure less, and I reckon for a while there I got to where I was right sinful" (102). Yet, in time, "I went on back and nobody ever say anything to me about how I'd been doin" (113).

So while Dock Reed recorded spirituals but never acquiesced to do otherwise, Vera Ward Hall not only sang the blues but performed, without censor, popularized tunes dealing with drugs and prostitution themes such as "I Been Drinkin." Lomax concedes: "On inquiry I found that Vera Hall had never understood their real significance. She had been carried away by the lyrical beauty of the lines and by the mournful sweetness of the music."[9] Although Livingston, Alabama, proved to be a backwater community, the repertoire of its African American singers illustrates the power of the oral tradition. Those with access to greater mobility appropriated songs from the popular culture to be disseminated in a folk cultural manner. Hall indicates that even during periods in her life when she gravitated mostly toward a sacred performance community and "got the blues, I don't sing um around nobody. I go off in the kitchen and close the door before I sing a blues that fits my case."[10]

Besides, the blues genre often gets situated on the bases of its text and content rather than on its extra-textual meaning, focusing on its context and use. In *Rainbow Sign*, Hall routinely exposed real-life experiences addressing atrocities committed by whites against their black counterparts as well as the absurdities of their color caste system. She mentions how whites denied African Americans the right to be seated on a chair in their homes, yet ate the food prepared by the very same hands. One could also be arrested for inadvertently bumping into a white person on a crowded street. Then, Hall reminds us: "Now don't you think that's enough to give a person the blues—to see and know things like that goin on right in your own home town."[11]

"The Boll Weevil Blues" also fit into Hall's repertoire. This song is a hom-

age to a pest that ravaged farms in the South. Her mentor, Rafe Addison, self-identified with it, saying, "he's just as lively and as hard to kill."[12] The insect gained the respect of those who had to contend with it.

Boll Weevil Blues

First time I seen the boll weevil,
He's sitting on the square.
Next time I seen him,
He had his family there.

Boll weevil here;
Boll weevil everywhere.
They done ate up all the cotton and corn.
All but the new-ground square.

Well, the farmer asked the merchant,
For some meat and meal.
Tain't nothing doing, old man,
Boll weevils in your field.

Hey, Boll weevil,
Where is your native home?
Way down in the bottom
Among the cotton and corn.

Later, Alan Lomax covered the same Alabama turf as his father before him. According to David Campbell, "By the time Alan Lomax recorded ["Boll Weevil Blues"] in 1959, the song had acquired more coherent form; she had licked it into shape with more frequent performance, and I imagine that it no longer varied much. Both the song and her singing of it matured in the interim, and were improved, but it is still a pleasure to have the first version; her voice, twenty years younger, was slightly hesitant by comparison, and perhaps even sweeter."[13]

Aesthetically speaking, Hall's recordings conform to what Titon defines as "downhome blues." Accordingly, "Hearing downhome blues for the first time…many listeners today use adjectives such as 'odd' or 'strange' to describe it" (xviii). For those who relate to blueswomen such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Vera Ward Hall's recordings will further defy their expectations. First, her extant musical repertoire results from recordings under fieldwork conditions. Alan Lomax later described an example of the "portable" recording machine, thus:

> The portable recording machine, which my father and I were the first to use, provided the first breakthrough. It was heavy (five hundred pounds) and it engraved a rather noisy sound groove on aluminum discs. Even so, by making it possible to record and play back music in remote areas, away from electrical sources, it gave a voice to the voiceless.[14]

Second, vaudevillian, city blues songs were heavily orchestrated. Since these recording sessions were impromptu, Hall chiefly sang a cappella. Finally, blues aficionados center the acquisition of a musical instrument as a primary quest of male blues performers. Within a rural context, however, a sacred or secular songfest only required the voices of willing men and women.

Vera Ward Hall remains a relatively obscure folk music figure. Yet her life speaks to the heart and soul of a people for whom Hall becomes emblematic of the thousands of accomplished community-based singers whose repertoire and talents never gained a larger audience. Even without Hall's degree of fame, based on what is known about her, we can say theirs was a musical universe. Although I have emphasized Hall's blues songs, for a fuller understanding of blues people, one must listen to this form within a high context of all the musical forms that coexisted with it: from lullabies to worksongs and spirituals to children's songs. ■

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Notes

[1] Notes, American Folklife Center, Library Congress, 1940

[2] Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867-1948*, (Urbana: U. of IL Pr., 1996), 403.

[3] Notes, Library Congress, 1940.

[4] Notes, Library Congress, 1940.

[5] Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (1960), p. 556.

[6] Notes, Archive Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1939.

[7] Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign*, (New York: Duell, Sloan, Pearce, 1959), 21

[8] Ibid., 103.

(Notes continue on page 81 after the photo insert)

[9] Notes, Archive Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1940.

[10] *Rainbow Sign*, 104.

[11] Ibid., 111.

[12] Ibid., 61.

[13] Quote from David Campbell review of Rounder CD 1513, "Afro-American Blues and Game Songs," http://www/mustard/org/uk/review/cow_blue.htm, 7/24/99.

[14] Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, (New York: Delta, 1993), xi.

A Blues Photo Essay by Axel Küstner

FIGURE 1
Willie King, Old Memphis, Alabama, May 1999.

Figure 2
Albert "Brook" Duck, Sandyland, Mississippi, May 1999.

Figure 3
Albert "Brook" Duck, Willie King, Aaron Hodge, Sandyland, Mississippi, May 1999.

Figure 4
Willie King and Travis Hodge, Old Memphis, Alabama, May 2000.

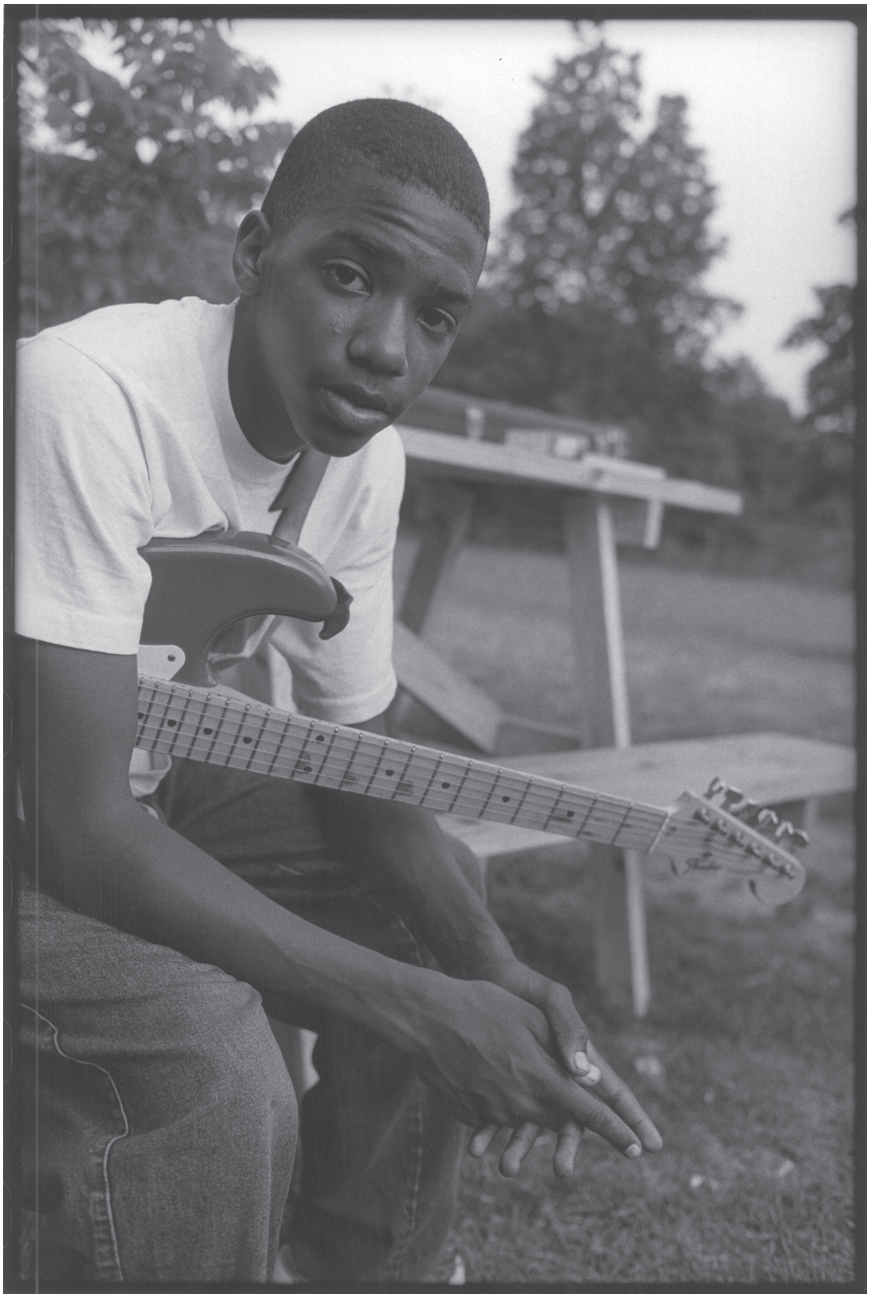

Figure 5
Travis Hodge, Old Memphis, Alabama, May 2000.

Figure 6
Willie King and partyers at "Bettie's Place," Sandyland, Mississippi, May 200l..

FIGURES 7, 8, 9 (above and opposite)
Willie King and partyers at "Bettie's Place," Sandyland, Mississippi, May 200l..


WILLIE KING & THE LIBERATORS


St. Louis
WILLIE KING & THE LIBERATORS

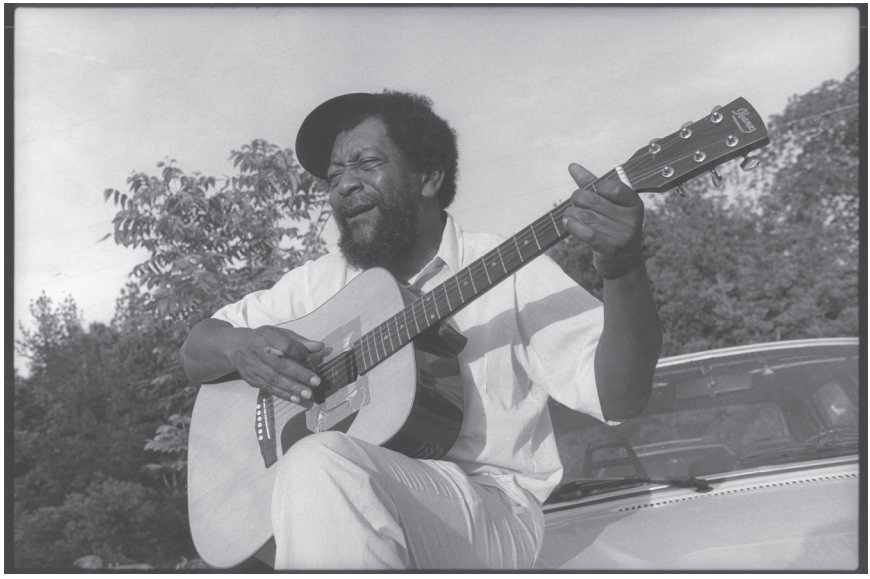

FIGURE 10

Willie King, Old Memphis, Alabama, May 1999.

A Vera Hall Discography

compiled by Steve Grauberger and Kevin Nutt

Vera Hall, vocals; unaccompanied

Livingston, Ala. Wednesday, 21 July 1937

1310-A-1	I Feel Like My Time Ain't Long	LC
1310-A-2	I Believe I'll Go Back Home	LC
1310-B-1	God's Goin Build Up De Zion Wall	LC
1310-B-2	God Knows I Am De One	LC

Note: LC = Library of Congress recording

Livingston, Ala. Thursday, 22 July 1937

1315-B-2	Railroad Bill	LC
1320-A-2	Po' Laz'us	LC
1320-A-2	John Henry	LC

Livingston, Ala. Friday, 23 July 1937

1323-A-1	Boll Weevil	LC
1323-A-2	Stagolee	LC
1323-A-3	Railroad Bill	LC; Rounder CD 1829
1323-B-1	Little Sally Walker	LC
1323-B-2	Catch A Nigger By De Toe	LC
1323-B-3	I Been Drinkin	LC; Rounder CD 1829
1325-B-1	Yaller Gal And Brown-Skinned Gal	LC
1325-B-2	Black Cat Told De White Cat	LC

Livingston, Ala. Sunday, 25 July 1937

1335-A-1	John Saw Dat Number	LC

Livingston, Ala. circa 26-30 May 1939

2678-B-2	Rosie	LC
2679-B-2	Home In The Rock	LC
2680-A-2	Come Up Horsey, Hey, Hey	LC; New World NW291 (LP)
2682-A-2	Awful Death	LC
2684-A-2	Carrie	LC
2684-B-1	Little Gal, Yes Ma'am	LC
2584-B-2	Candy Gal	LC
2684-B-3	Hold The Gates	LC
2687-B-2	Hiding-Seek Song	LC
2687-B-3	Down On Me	LC
3241-A-2	John Done Saw That Number	LC

Livingston, Ala. Thursday, 31 October 1940

4020-A-1	What Kind Of Man Jesus Is	LC
4049-A-1	Little Lap-Dog Lullaby	LC; Rounder CD 1829
4049-A-3	Hang Up The Baby's Stocking	LC
4049-A-4	Another Man Done Gone	LC; *AAFS 16; AFS* L4, L49 *(LPs)*; Rounder CD 1829
4049-B-1	Another Man Done Gone	LC; *AAFS 16; AFS* L4, L49 *(LPs)*
4049-B-3	Boll Weevil Blues	LC; *AAFS 16; AFS* L4, L51 *(LPs)*; Rounder CD 1829
4050-A-1	Po' Laz'us	LC; Rounder CD 1829

Note: AAFS = Archive of American Folk Song label; AFS = Archive of (American) Folk Song label

Livingston, Ala. circa 3 November 1940

4065-B-2	When I Wore My Apron Low	LC
4066-B-2	Sally's Got Religion	LC
4066-B-3	Sammy Gone Away	LC
4067-B-1	Black Woman	LC

4068-A-1	Tell Me What The Jaybird Say	LC

Vera Hall, Doc Reed (vocals) or -1 Vera Hall only (vocal)

Tuscaloosa, Alabama, January/February 1950

Dead and gone	Folkways FE4418, FA2691
Free at last	Folkways FE4418 , 01486
My God ain't no lying man	Folkways FP38, FE4473
Troubled, Lord I'm troubled	Folkways FP38, FE4473
Look how they done my Lord	Folkways FP38, FE4473
Job, Job	Folkways FP38, FE4473
What month was Jesus born	Folkways FP38, FE4473
Somebody's talking 'bout Jesus	Folkways FP38, FE4473
Death is awful	Folkways FP38, FE4473
I'm climbing the hill of Mt. Zion	Folkways FP38, FE4473
Low down the chariot and let me ride	Folkways FP38, FE4473
The blood done signed my name	Folkways FP38, FE4473
Everybody talkin' about Heaven ain't goin' there	F'ways FP38, FE4473
Plumb the line	Folkways FP38, FE4473
What month was Jesus born -1	Folkways FE4473
Noah, Noah -1	Folkways FE4473
Traveling shoes -1	Folkways FE4473

Note: All titles on FP38 also on FA2038. "Dead and gone" as "Prayer song" on FA2691, as by "Dock Reed and Vera Hall Ward. One other title on FA2691 is by Vera Hall; other titles on FA2691, FE4418 & 01486 are not by Hall.

Vera Hall

Livingston, Alabama, c, mid-1959

Trouble so hard	Atlantic LP1346
Death have mercy	Atlantic LP1346
No room at the inn	Prestige Int. INT25005; Rounder 1706

The last month of the year	Prestige Int. INT25005
Wild Ox Moan	Atlantic 7 82496-2
Boll Weevil Holler	Atlantic 7 82496-2

Dock Reed and Vera Hall, vocals; unaccompanied

Livingston, Ala. Wednesday, 21 July 1937

1315-A-1	Mournin' Song	LC
1315-A-2	Mournin' Song	LC

Livingston, Ala. Thursday, 22 July 1937

1315-B-1	Let Me Ride	

Dock Reed, Henry Reed and Vera Hall, vocals; unaccompanied

Livingston, Ala. Thursday, 22 July 1937

1317-A-1	Trouble So Hard	LC; *AAFS 11; AFS* L3 (LP)
1317-A-2	Choose Yo' Seat And Set Down	LC; *AAFS 11; AFS* L3. L52 (LPs)
1317-B-1	Plumb De Line	LC
1317-B-2	My Time Ain't Long	LC
1317-B-3	Lord I'm Rollin'	LC
1318-A-1	Done Done All I Kin Do For De Lord	LC
1318-A-2	Free At Last	LC
1318-B-1	Handwriting On De Wall	LC; *AAFS 11; AFS* L3 (LP)
1318-B-2	When I Go Home	LC
1319-A-1	Soon One Morning	LC
1319-A-2	Plumb De Line	LC
1319-B-1	Good News	LC
1319-B-2	Sumpin' On My Mind Keeps On Worryin' Me	LC
1320-A-3	Thank You For De Risin Sun	LC
1320-B-1	Outshine De Sun	LC
1320-B-2	Jes' Tip Around My Bed Right Easy	LC
1321-A-1	Job, Job	LC

1321-A-2	What Is The Soul Of Man?	LC; Rounder CD 1829
1321-B-1	Doan Know When Ole Death Gwine Call Me Home	LC

Dock Reed, Henry Reed and Vera Hall, vocals; unaccompanied.

Livingston, Ala. Sunday, 25 July 1937

1333-A-1	I'll Soon Be Gone	LC; Rounder CD 1829
1333-A-2	Oh Jesus Jes' Write My Name	LC

Dock Reed, Jesse Allison and Vera Hall, vocals; unaccompanied

Livingston, Ala. circa 26-30 May 1939

2680- B-1	Job, Job	LC
2680 B-2	Love Comes Twinklin' Down	LC
2682-A-1	Waitin On You	LC
2682-B-1	Job. Job	LC
2682-B-2	Jesus Goin Make Up My Dyin Bed	LC
3554-A	John Saw Dat Number	LC
3555-A	Job, Job	LC
3555-B	Job, Job	LC

Dock Reed and Vera Hall, vocals; unaccompanied.

circa 26-30 May 1939

2685-A-1	Job, Job	LC
2685-B-1	John Saw Dat Number	LC
2686-A-1	Jesus, The Man I Long To Know	LC
2686-A-2	When I Can Read My Title Clear	LC
2686-B-1	Po' Sinner, Farewell	LC
2686-B-2	He That Believe Have An Everlasting Home	LC
2687-A-1	Jesus' Blood Done Make Me Whole	LC
2687-A-2	Motherless Children Sees A Hard Time	LC
2687-B-1	Climbin Up De Hill 0' Mount Zion	LC

Reed, vocal-1/speech-2; Vera Hall, moaning-2; unaccompanied.

Livingston, Ala. circa 2 November 1940

4035B-2	Makes No Difference What De People Say-1	LC
4051-A-2	Prayer-2	LC
4057-A-1	Tell Me What The Jaybird Say-1	LC
4057-A-2	Drinkin'Wine-1	LC
4057-B-1	We All Have Something-1	LC
4057-B-2	Everywhere I Go Somebody Talkin 'Bout Jesus –1	LC
4058-A-1	Down On Me-1	LC; *AAFS 47; AFS L10 (LP)*
4058-A-2	Good News-1	LC

Reed and Vera Hall, vocals; unaccompanied.

Livingston, Ala. circa 2 November 1940

4020-A-2	When I Can Read My Title Clear	LC
4020-A-3	On Jordans Stormy Banks	LC
4020-B-1	Soon One Mornin'	LC; *AFS L53 (LP)*
4020-B-2	Certainly Lord	LC; *AAFS 47;A FS L 10 (LP)*
4035-A-1	Job, Job	LC; *AFS L53 (LP)*
4035-A-2	I'm All The Time In Trouble With My Heart	LC
4035-B-1	Low Down, Death, Right Easy	LC
4036-A-1	Job, Job	LC; Rounder CD 1829
4036-A-2	Gwine Home Some Day	LC
4036-B-1	John Saw Dat Number	LC
4050-A-2	Let Your Will Be Done	LC
4050-B-1	I Can't Hold Out No Longer	LC; Rounder CD 1829
4050-B-2	Jesus' Blood Done Made Me Whole	LC
4051-A-1	Come, We That Love The Lord	LC

Dock Reed, Vera Hall, Hettie Godfrey and Polly Larkin, vocals;

unaccompanied

Livingston, Ala. circa 2 November 1940

4051-A-3	When I Can Read My Title Clear	LC

BROWN CHAPEL BAPTIST CHURCH Service: Rev. Boyd, speech-1; with moaning by congregation-1; Rev. Gage, speech-2; Congregation, vocals-3; Dock Reed, vocal-4; Vera Hall, vocal-5; Dock Reed, speech-6; Polly Larkin, vocal-7.

Livingston, Ala. Sunday 27 October 1940

All in this section are Library of Congress Recordings

4037-A	Sermon –1	LC
4037-8	Sermon –1	LC
4038-A	title *unknown-?*	LC
4038-B	Sermon –2	LC
4039-A-1	Sermon –2	LC
4039-A-2	Have You Decided Which Way To Go? –3	LC
4039-B-1	Sermon –2	LC
4039-B-2	Have You Decided Which Way To Go? –3	LC
4039-B-3	I'll Be There In The Glory-3	LC
4040-A	On Jordans Stony Bank-3	LC
4040-B	On Jordan's Stony Bank –3	LC
4041-A	Were You There When They Crucified My Lord -3	LC
4041-B-1	It May Be The Last Time -3, 4, 5	LC
4041-B-2	Prayer-6	LC
4041-B-3	Prayer-6	LC
4041-B-4	Prayer-8	LC
4042-A-1	Happy Shouting-4	LC
4042-A-2	Happy Shouting-4	LC
4042-B-1	Jesus Gwine Take Me In His Lovin' Arms –4	LC
4042-B-2	John The Baptist, John Divine-5, 7	LC
4042-B-3	Banbury Cross-5	LC

Jesse Allison, vocals; with group.

Livingston, Ala. c. 26-30 May 1939
2684-A-1 Amazing Grace LC
Note: This group is almost certainly a Dock Reed and Vera Hall group as this title is listed under a Reed and Hall heading in John A Lomax's field notes.

Albert "Tongue Tied" Allison, Dock Reed and Vera Hall, vocal trio; unaccompanied

Livingston, Ala. 26-30 May 1939
2685-A-2 Heard De Angels Singin' LC

Vera Hall and Doc Reed. Monday and Tuesday, June 16-17, 1947

Livingston, Alabama. Recorded by Byron Arnold for Univ. of Alabama.
Two Wings Sail Away
If I Died on the Battlefield
Another Man Done Gone
Little Lap Dog
Hol' de Gate
Honey in de Rock
Love Comes Twinkling Down
Low Down the Chariot
John Saw that Number
Low Down Death Right Easy Alabama Traditions 104 (cassette)

Goodbye Sammy
Climb Up Zion
Moanin'
Oh Lord, I Thank You for the Risin of de Sun
Oh Death tis Awful
Ridin' In a Buggy

Candy Girl
Sammy
Lawd, Thank You for the Risin Sun
Stagalee
Low Down Chariot
John Saw De Number
Low Down Death Right Easy
Hearse Keep Rollin
In That Land — Alabama Traditions 104 (cassette)
Free At Last

Vera Hall. Monday and Tuesday, June 16-17, 1947

Livingston, Alabama. Recorded by Byron Arnold for Univ. of Alabama.
Black Woman
Man Done Gone
Tie Tampin
Workin' All Summer
Stagalee
Didn't you Heat My Lord Call
Long As I Can de Spirit
Ridin in Buggy
Sally Walker
Old Arks a Movin'
Clear de Line
Ole Cow Shivern in de Cool Water
Workin' on the Building
There's Sumpin on My Mind
Is Ya All Hid
Speckled Lady
Rosie Baby Rosie

Sources

This discography was prepared using the following references:

Baklanoff, Joy, and John Bealle. Pamphlet accompanying *Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy: Historical Alabama Field Recordings from the Byron Arnold Collection of Traditional Tunes.* Montgomery: Alabama Traditions 104. Cassette, 1992.

Dixon, Robert M.W., John Godrich, and Howard W. Rye. *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Hayes, Cedric J. Hayes, and Robert Laughton. *Gospel Records 1943-1969 A Black Music Discography.* 2 Vols. London: Record Information Services, 1992.

Chasing John Henry in Alabama and Mississippi: A Personal Memoir of Work in Progress

John Garst

The novel, *John Henry Days* (Whitehead 2001), revived my interest in the historicity of the legendary John Henry ("John Henry," Laws I 1) (Laws 1964: 246). Re-reading the classic works of Guy Johnson (1929) and Louis Chappell (1933) left me unsettled—their studies are incomplete and their conclusions are not supported by their data. I am pursuing three loose ends. Although I have not yet found documentary evidence of John Henry, I have found information that supports stories of John Henry in Alabama and Mississippi.

Steel Driving Man

Rock is removed by drilling holes, packing them with explosives, and blasting. According to the legend and ballad, John Henry was a black "steel driver," the "hammer man" on a "double-jack" rock-drilling team, the other member being the "shaker" or "turner."

While the shaker holds the "steel" (drill) in position, the driver hits it rhythmically with a sledgehammer. Between blows the shaker gives the steel a quarter turn and may shake off accumulated dust and debris. Singing sets and keeps the right pace and rhythmic timing. Periodically the routine might be interrupted for the hole to be cleared of rock debris using a "spoon."

The drilling end of an old-time steel resembles a chisel, although it might have a curved edge. When a drill gets dull it is exchanged for a recently sharpened and tempered one. Also, when the hole gets too deep for a shorter steel

it is exchanged for a longer one. A good shaker changes steels without interrupting the driver's rhythm.

Sharpening and tempering are done on the spot or nearby. Since sharpening destroys tempering, a newly sharpened drill has to be re-tempered. The hammer and drilling ends are tempered differently, the hammer end to be softer, to avoid brittleness, and the drilling end to be harder (Nichols 2001; Wild 2001).

The composition of the steel might have allowed the sharpened tip to be tempered, by heating and quenching in water, to the "blue steel" stage (Nichols 2001). This could explain the third line of a verse collected, presumably in Alabama, by Peter Brannon (Anon 1930).

> Jawn Henry hammered in th' mountains,
> And blows from his shoulder did rain,
> Hung his hammer on a little blue point,
> Sayin', "Lord, I'm a steel drivin' man."

Brannon's text is probably a composite, since the next verse is almost identical except for "little blue place." Thus, "little blue blaze" (Johnson 1929: 90) can be explained by the mutations "point" –> "place" –> "blaze," the first substitution preserving meaning and the second sound.

Song and legend say that John Henry was a famous steel driver who worked in railroad tunnel construction during the last half of the nineteenth century, when hand drillers were being replaced by machines. Somehow he got into a contest with a steam-powered drill. In most versions of the story, John Henry wins the contest then dies from the effort.

Status of "John Henry" Studies

The two editions of Norm Cohen's *Long Steel Rail* say of "John Henry":

> Today, in retrospect, it is safe to assert that in recent decades no other ballad native to this country has been more widely known or more often recorded, has stimulated more printed commentary, or has inspired more folk and popular literature.

> . . . As it is, we shall probably never know for certain the circumstances of the alleged contest. . . . Our only hope is that one day a contemporary printed account in some obscure journal or newspaper will be unearthed, and even that is unlikely . . .
>
> (Cohen 1981: 64, 67)

> We don't even know with the certainty that only contemporaneous documentation can provide whether the ballad has a basis in fact, and if so, when and where. I expected as much when I wrote my comments in the first edition and am not at all surprised that the passage of another two decades has not seen interest in the mythic hero diminish. But it has failed to provide the elusive answers.
>
> (Cohen 2000: xix)

Even so, received wisdom locates John Henry's deeds at Great ("Big") Bend Tunnel, between Talcott and Hinton, Summers County, West Virginia, during its construction for the C & O (Chesapeake and Ohio) Railway in 1870–72. This is often stated with certainty. A WWW site for John Henry Days, an annual event held at Talcott since 1996 and a subject of *John Henry Days*, proclaims:

> That John Henry lived seems beyond doubt. That he drove steel in the Great Bend Tunnel in the early 1870's seems certain. That he drove steel against a steam drill seems likely. That he died from over-exertion in the contest seems somewhat less likely, if wonderfully poetic.
>
> (Anon 1998)

Received wisdom echoes the conclusions of Johnson (1929) and Chappell (1933). According to Johnson, "three-fourths of those who make any pretense at all to knowing where John Henry beat the steam drill will say Big Bend Tunnel" (1929: 25). Many versions of the ballad name it as well.

Both Johnson and Chappell visited the Big Bend community, each interviewing a number of people who claimed to know something about John Henry. Each included in his book all the information he had gathered that he

considered to be significant. These books now provide the bulk of the "raw data" on which further considerations of "John Henry" must be based.

Johnson was cautious.

> Perhaps the wisest thing would be to suspend judgment on this question, but, after weighing all of the evidence, I prefer to believe that (1) there was a Negro steel driver named John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel, that (2) he competed with a steam drill in a test of the practicability of the device, and that (3) he probably died soon after the contest, perhaps from fever. Nevertheless, I am not irrevocably wedded to this position, and I hope that this volume will be instrumental in provoking someone to bring to light what I have failed so far to find, namely, some evidence of a documentary sort which will settle the question conclusively.
>
> (Johnson 1929: 54)

Chappell was not cautious.

> That the John Henry tradition is factually based seems too obvious now for serious doubt. The man in the case, notwithstanding what his real name was, or what became of him, was known at Big Bend Tunnel as John Henry, and is still remembered by a few who are certain of his existence, and of his activity there. . . . At all events, it is no longer necessary, or possible, to regard "John Henry" as made up of whole cloth. The energy and variety of the Big Bend community will not allow it.
>
> (Chappell 1933: 92)

Chappell (1933: 6-20) excoriates Johnson for inconsistency and inconclusiveness. He is outraged (1933: 6) that Johnson did not acknowledge a report on his investigations in the Big Bend community, which began in September 1925. Johnson visited there in June 1927. According to Chappell (1933: 6, n33), Johnson saw Chappell's report in February 1927, and after that Johnson stated, for the first time in print, a belief that John Henry was historical, rather than "mythical." Johnson never answered Chappell's charge in the literature (Cohen 1981: 67; Wilgus 1959: 398; Williams 1983: 60). However, he did

explain how he came to his "John Henry" research in a personal letter to Chappell (Johnson 1928) and it was in February 1926, a year before he saw Chappell's report, that Johnson "began to pursue the idea that the Big Bend Tunnel was the place of origin of the John Henry tradition" (Johnson 1929: 31). If Chappell's report came to Johnson in the latter's capacity as a reviewer of a manuscript submitted for publication, as Chappell indicates (1933: 6, n33), then Johnson must have felt ethically constrained not to mention it.

According to Williams (1983: 45), "Most scholars have considered the work of Johnson and Chappell very convincing, as I do." Dorson (1965) is included: "The evidence painstakingly gathered and skillfully evaluated by Chappell builds a powerful case for the historicity of John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel." Joining Cohen as at least mild skeptics are Leach (1966: 95), "The fact remains that we have no sure evidence beyond the songs that place John Henry as a steel driver on the C. and O. or any other American railroad," and Barry (1934: 25), "And, while the match may have occurred, we do not feel that an actual match is necessary to account for the ballad."

Another View

In my opinion, the data of Johnson and Chappell make it very unlikely that John Henry raced a steam drill at Big Bend Tunnel. The evidence for this conclusion can be summarized as follows. (1) Intensive efforts to find John Henry at Big Bend failed. (2) No documentary evidence of John Henry or a contest was found. (3) The positive testimonial evidence contains significant inconsistencies. (4) The negative testimonial evidence is strong and plausible. (5) Alabama, a plausible alternative to Big Bend, is supported by substantive, coherent, and detailed reports that were not investigated satisfactorily.

Johnson and Chappell each spent about eight years (perhaps more) investigating John Henry. This is at least sixteen man-years of intensive effort. Chappell focused entirely on Big Bend Tunnel, as did Johnson for about three years. They found neither documentary nor consistent testimonial evidence of John Henry, even though they were pursuing him there at a time when men who had worked at or near Big Bend Tunnel during its construction were still living.

Of eleven such men who communicated with Johnson, Chappell, or both,

six claimed to have known John Henry at Big Bend and five gave descriptions. Three said he was dark or black, six feet tall, and two hundred pounds. One said he was yellow, five feet eight inches or less, and one hundred sixty to one hundred seventy pounds. One said he was black and one hundred sixty pounds. Are these the vagaries of old men's memories from their teens? Or do they describe three different John Henrys? Since "John Henry" is a very common combination of given names, it is not surprising that they would have known various John Henrys. Since no more than one could have been the legendary figure, at least two informants seem to have misidentified him. All five could have and probably did.

Of the eleven, only C. S. "Neal" Miller, who was about eighteen in 1871, says he saw the contest, and he saw it only sporadically—"I saw how they were getting along from time to time" (Johnson 1929: 41). In the interview published by Chappell (1933: 46-47), Miller does not claim to have seen the contest.

Of the eleven, five did not know or know of John Henry, seven knew nothing of a contest, and three denied that a contest occurred or doubted that it could have. The strongest denial is from Sam Wallace, who was "about fifteen at the time" and who was "frequently at the tunnel during construction."

> I never heard of John Henry until two years ago...
>
> In the first place, if it [the contest] had happened I would have heard about it at the time because I was at the tunnel a great deal and I knew most of the steel drivers. In the second place, I'm sure there never was any steam drill at the tunnel. No, I think this John Henry stuff is just a tale somebody started.
>
> (Johnson 1929: 34-35)

The best explanation of Johnson and Chappell's failures to find John Henry at Big Bend is that it is the wrong place. "Alabama claims" gave Johnson great concern and probably were the main reason for his caution about Big Bend.

Alabama Claims

C. C. Spencer, Salt Lake City, Utah, wrote:

. . . John Henry was a native of Holly Springs, Mississippi, and was shipped to the Cruzee mountain tunnel, Alabama, to work on the A. G. S. Railway in the year of 1880. In 1881 he had acquired such a skill as a hand driller that every one along the road was singing his praise. It happened that at about this time an agent for a steam drill company (drills used now are compressed air) came around trying to sell the contractor a steam drill. The contractor informed the agent that he had a Negro who could beat his damned old steam drill any day; as a result of this argument the company owning the drill offered to put it in for nothing if this man could drill more rock with the hammer than he could with his drill. And, so the contractor (Shea and Dabner) accepted the proposition.

This man John Henry, whose real name was John H. Dabner, was called to the office and they asked him if he could beat this steam drill. He said that he could, but the fact of the matter was he had never seen a steam drill and did not know what one could do. The contractor told him that if he could beat this steam drill he would give him a new suit of clothes and fifty dollars, which was a large amount for that day and time. John Henry accepted the proposition providing they would buy him a fourteen-pound hammer. This the contractor did.

Now the drills that we had in those days were nothing like the drills we have today. The drills they used then in hard rock could only drill a hole twenty-five feet deep in a day and the average man could only drill a hole about fifteen feet deep in a day working by hand.

Well—preparations were being made for the race for about three weeks, and on the 20th of September, 1882, the race took place, the agent from New York using steam, and the man from Mississippi, using a fourteen-pound hammer, in the hardest rock ever known in Alabama.

The agent had lots of trouble with his drill, but John Henry and his helper (Rubin Johnson) one turning the drill and the other striking, kept pecking away with that old fourteen-pound hammer. Of course the writer was only about fourteen years old at that time, but I remember there were about three or four hundred people present.

When the poor man with the hammer fell in the arms of his helper in a dead faint, they threw water on him and revived him, and his first words were: "send for my wife, I am blind and dying."

They made way for his wife, who took his head in her lap and the last words he said were: "Have I beat that old steam drill?" The record was twenty-seven and one half feet (27 1/2'). The steam drill twenty-one [21'], and the agent lost his steam drill.

(Johnson 1929: 19-20)

In a second letter, Spencer wrote:

I have just received your letter and am indeed pleased to know that it was of some assistance to you in writing the history of John Henry.

Now, my Dear Sir, I feel sure that you do not expect one's mind to be clear concerning the minor things which were connected with this story forty-four years after the Actor has passed from the stage. As I kept no diary in those days, I must quote from memory the facts as near as I can recall them.

No. 1. The name of the Railroad was the Alabama Great Southern.

No. 2. His name was John Henry Dabner, but we called him John Henry.

No. 3. I think he was born a slave in the Dabner family.

No. 4. I should judge that he was at least 25 or 26 years old at the time of this death. His weight was near 180 lbs.; his color very dark he was about 5' 10 or 11 inches in height.

No. 5. I do not recall the name of the County if I ever knew it, but the tunnel is near the line which divides Georgia and Alabama. I was told by the older men that there was a town on the Georgia side by the name Riseingforn. At that time I was under the care of a white man, the young Master of my people and I was never left to wander around very much, so I never went to this town in Georgia. There was, also, a town fifteen miles to the north in Alabama (in which was an Iron-Ore mine) by the name of "Red Mountain."

> Now, Sir, as this Railroad was in the process of construction, there was no train's running upon it, so the names of these towns may have changed ere this time.
>
> No, John Henry never was in West Virginia, but his wife stayed with the older men and cooked for many of them after we came to West Virginia, in 1886, for the purpose of working on the Narfork & Western Railroad in the Elkhorn tunnel.
>
> The above is about all that I know of any importance about John Henry.
>
> (Johnson 1929: 20-21)

Spencer went on to state that "John Brown was the man of the 'Big Bend tunnel fame,'" giving dates for the construction of Big Bend that are too early by one to eleven years, and to quote a song about John Brown, "'John Brown was a little boy, sitting upon his Mother's knee. He said the Big Ben tunnel on the C. & O. Road will sure be the death of me.'" Johnson was understandably mystified.

Red Mountain, mentioned by both Spencer and the following informant, is at Birmingham, Alabama. It is a ridge that runs southwest to northeast along the southeastern edge of the city.

F. P. Barker, Birmingham, Alabama, wrote:

> I take great Peasur to write and informing you that there was a real Man John Henry. Brown skin Colord 147 lb a steel driver He driv against a steam drill and beate it down a shaft advancin. He song before He wowed let it beat him down that He wowed die with his Hammer in his Hand and He did it. I F. P. Barker was driving steel on Red Mountain at that time this Happen about 45 years ago sowm where about that time. Just as true as you see the sun. there was a real man John Henry. He was the champion of wowld with a Hammer.
>
> . . . I was Driving steel on Red Mountain at the time of the contest. John Henry was on Cursey Mountain tunnel in His song he told his shaker to shak that drill and turn it around John Henry is Bownd to Beat the steem Drill down the steem Drill Beat men of every other Race

down to the sand. Now Ill gaive my life before I let it beat the Negro man. I tell you more a bout it when I see some more of my old mates I am 73 years old and it been nerely a half a cenetery.

(Johnson 1929: 22)

Glendora Cannon Cummings, Lansing, Michigan, wrote:

I am writing you concerning the history of John Henry. This is my story:

My uncle Gus (the man who raised my father) was working by John Henry and saw him when he beat the steam drill and fell dead. This was in the year of 1887. It was at Oak Mountain Alabama. They were working for Shay and Dabney, the meanest white contractors at that time.

The steel drivers were the highest salaried men. But John Henry's salary was higher than theirs. Nobody ever drove steel as well as him. I mean when I say the steel drivers were the highest paid; that for a negro in those days in South.

John Henry wielded a nine pound Hammer. So the words of one of the songs: Is: "A nine pound hammer killed John Henry but this old hammer wont kill me." Both my Uncle Gus and my father were steel drivers. So I have heard several different kinds of the John Henry songs. In one John Henry song a man named Lazarus is mentioned, and also George Collins. These people are not myths. They all lived in the camp with my Uncle Gus and my father. My father arrived after John Henry dropped dead, but my Uncle Gus and John Henry were friends.

(Johnson 1929: 22-23)

Disposition of Alabama Claims by Johnson and Chappell

Johnson (1929: 24-26) located an Oak Mountain "just to the southeast of Birmingham, but my informant could not say whether this is the right place or not. There may be any number of hills in Alabama known locally as Oak Mountain." He could never find "Cruzee"/"Cursey" Mountain, but he established that it was not on the Alabama Great Southern route. He found a

white Dabney family living in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Even so, he abandoned pursuit of the Alabama claims. "In view of the absence of any sort of objective evidence to support these Alabama claims, they must be dismissed as unproved . . . [Many songs place John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel but] I have never seen any such reference to any of the Alabama places mentioned above. Furthermore, the Big Bend Tunnel was built at least ten years before the alleged date of construction of the Cruzee or Cursey Mountain Tunnel in Alabama. Therefore it has priority rights."

Chappell (1933: 42) also invoked "priority": "[The Alabama claims] will probably deserve more attention as authentic records when the place of the alleged contest occurred is found in Alabama. At all events, the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway in West Virginia has priority claims, and the obvious leaning of the tradition would seem to promise more in that state." Later in his book he takes a derisive shot at Johnson (Chappel 1933: 83, n10): "As his authority for John Henry, he [Frank Shay] cites Dr. Johnson, who is still trying to find Cruzee Mountain in Alabama."

"Priority" is puzzling. What might it have to do with the issues at hand?

Methods

The studies of Johnson and Chappell have clear shortcomings. In science, and I assume in history and other fields, it is not acceptable to seek only verification for an hypothesis. One must (1) formulate the possible hypotheses, trying not to miss any, and (2) try to *disprove* each of them. A problem can be considered to be reasonably solved only when all hypotheses, except one, have been disproved, and that one has survived meaningful attempts to disprove it. Of course, there are circumstances under which verification of one hypothesis would be strong evidence against the others. Thus, if it were documented that John Henry raced a steam drill at one locality, it could be considered very unlikely that he did it at other places as well.

Neither Johnson nor Chappell took this approach. Chappell was so convinced by the strength of the John Henry tradition in the Big Bend community that he could not see that other locations might be possible: "It is no longer necessary, or possible, to regard 'John Henry' as made up of the whole cloth. The energy and variety of the Big Bend Community will not allow it"

(1933: 92). He gave his whole effort to verifying that John Henry was at Big Bend. Similarly, Big Bend lured Johnson away from other possibilities. Both failed to find substantial evidence placing John Henry there and both failed to follow up other leads, especially the Alabama claims, leaving their research incomplete.

Some regard Chappell's as the better work. "Chappell's is the more persuasive because of its more extensive and better utilized data" (Cohen 1981: 66). "Chappell researched it much more thoroughly and his conclusions are, therefore, more persuasive" (Williams 1983: 61). Although Johnson's study is incomplete, I think it the better work because he recognized its limitations and qualified his conclusions. Also, he cast a broader net than Chappell, who focused almost exclusively on Big Bend Tunnel.

How valid, as evidence, is the strength of tradition, which influenced Johnson and Chappell so strongly? A strong tradition cannot be discarded without evaluation, but it must be regarded with skepticism. Consider "Ella Speed" (Laws I 6). Lead Belly and Mance Lipscomb placed its action in Dallas, and nearly all traditional examples have been recovered from Texas, yet New Orleans is where Ella Speed lived and was killed (Cowley and Garst 2001). Similarly, by the 1950s "Delia" (Laws I 5) seemed to have its strongest tradition in the Caribbean, in the Bahamas in particular, but Delia Green died in Savannah, Georgia (Garst 2000). Relocalizations of songs and legends are so well known and often demonstrated that they require no further comment here.

"John Henry" presents a particularly vexing kind of research problem. Thanks to Johnson and Chappell, there is an abundance of testimonial data. Some might be correct, but none can be accepted without support, and it seems likely that most, perhaps all, is erroneous. How does one proceed where there is an abundance of data but *every* datum is likely to be *wrong*?

One must, of course, attempt to find documentary evidence. Solving the problem satisfactorily will require documentation of John Henry and his contest with the steam drill. However, progress can be made without this. For example, it would be progress to find documentation supporting meaningful details of informants' stories.

In a court of law, a witness can be impeached by catching him or her making inconsistent or contradictory statements. Similarly, the testimony of a witness

is strengthened if meaningful efforts to impeach fail or if other witnesses verify the testimony independently. This applies here as well.

Present Approach

Things that might be easiest to document include places and people. I am pursuing three such leads that turn up in the work of Johnson and Chappell.

(1) Two Alabama informants mention "Cruzee"/"Cursey" Mountain, which Johnson failed to find, even though he consulted several knowledgeable people living in Alabama. Where is this mountain? Is there a railroad tunnel through it?

Even Chappell recognized (1933: 42) that finding "Cruzee"/"Cursey" Mountain in Alabama would justify further pursuit of the Alabama claims.

(2) Two of Johnson's "Alabama" informants named the "contractors" for whom John Henry worked. Spencer gave them as "Shea and Dabner," Cummings as "Shay and Dabney." In addition, a "Jamaica" informant, C. S. Farquharson, wrote:

> The following names are known:-
> Dabner, in charge of blasting operations.
> John Henry, checking up cuts and embankments.
> Shea, Engineer in charge.
> Tommy Walters, Assistant Pay Master.
>
> (Chappell 1933: 42)

Leon R. Harris, of Moline, Illinois, says that the name of John Henry's "captain" was Tommy Walters, "probably an assistant foreman however" (Johnson 1929: 18).

Here are three invocations of Shay/Shea and Dabner/Dabney and two of Tommy Walters. All seem to be independent. In addition, Spencer says that Rubin Johnson was John Henry's helper.

Were these real people? Where did they live? Were they in railroad construction?

(3) The name "W. T. Blankenship" appears at the bottom of the Blan-

kenship broadside, "John Henry, The Steel Driving Man," which is undated but which appears to be ca. 1900 (Johnson 1929: 84-90). Johnson bought the broadside from Mrs. C. L. Lynn of Rome, Georgia, who stated that she was not sure whether or not her grandmother had obtained it before or after 1895, when Mrs. Lynn was born (Lynn 1927). This may be the oldest known version of "John Henry."

Who was W. T. Blankenship?

"Cruzee"/"Cursey," Oak, and Red Mountains

With "Cruzee"/"Cursey" Mountain I had instant success. Having lived in Georgia since 1963, and being something of an outdoors type, I am familiar with the names of various Georgia rivers. As I mulled over "Cruzee" and "Cursey" I was struck by their resemblance to "Coosa," the name of a river that flows west from the vicinity of Rome, Georgia, into Alabama, and then south. (Later I learned that it is also the name of an Alabama county.)

Is there a Coosa Mountain in Alabama? A Google search of the World Wide Web turned up a page describing a "railfan tour" of the Central of Georgia (C of G), now part of the Norfolk Southern Corporation, in Alabama. The following is included:

> **This text is courtesy of Casey Thomason:**
>
> **Leeds.** The starting point for this segment is the intersection of US-78 and AL-25, in the town of Leeds, which is less than 15 miles east of Birmingham. Here at this intersection, there is a large wooden trestle which crosses US-78 and the Atlanta–Birmingham Crescent Route mainline. After turning south onto AL-25, you'll follow the tracks all the way to Vincent, which is about 15 miles by rail. You will soon cross the railroad tracks, and start up the first mountain on the tour, so far. This is Oak Mountain.
>
> There is a tunnel here, referred to as the "short tunnel," but access is very difficult, and would require hiking thru the woods. This would not only be hard work, it would also be blatant trespassing, so you're urged to forego this location.
>
> **Long Tunnel.** At the bottom of this hill there are a few road

> crossings that turn off AL-25 and make for good photo ops. Staying southeast on AL-25, you'll cross the tracks again, and AL-25 will make a sharp right, still following the tracks for a short distance. When the road is about to start uphill, there will be a small dirt road turning to the right, called "Tunnel Road." Turn right onto this to see the west portal of Long Tunnel. This road leads to two houses, and it appears to be a public road, at least to the crossing.
>
> **Vandiver.** Back on AL-25, follow the road more eastward, and it will cross Coosa Mountain. At the bottom of the hill is the small community of Vandiver. . . .
>
> (Thomason 2001)

Here are references to Oak and Coosa Mountains, the places mentioned by Johnson's three "Alabama" informants, as well as mention of a railroad tunnel at each, "short" tunnel at Oak Mountain, "long" at Coosa. I have since discovered that "short" and "long" are these tunnels' current colloquial names. Formally, they are Oak and Coosa Mountain Tunnels, or simply Oak and Coosa Tunnels, named after the mountains that they penetrate.

Leeds, Alabama, is about fifteen miles east of Birmingham, mostly in Jefferson County (part is in Shelby County and part in St. Clair County). Oak Tunnel is just south of Leeds, across the county line in Shelby County. Coosa Tunnel is two miles south of Oak Tunnel. As noted previously, Red Mountain, mentioned by Johnson informants Spencer and Barker, borders nearby Birmingham. Spencer mentioned "Riseingforn," in Georgia. Rising Fawn is in Dade County, northwestern Georgia, sixteen miles from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and not far from Rome, Georgia, where the Blankenship broadside was found.

How could "Coosa" turn into "Cursey" and "Cruzee"? Easily, especially to someone who had heard "Coosa" pronounced but not seen it in print. I am told that some locals pronounce it "KOO-see" (Lofgren and Lofgren 2001). That's close to "Cursey," which turns into "Cruzee" by a sound inversion.

Oak and Coosa Tunnels were put through in 1887-88 by the Columbus and Western (C & W) Railway, a subsidiary of the Central Railroad and Banking Company (Georgia) (Anon 1958: 16-17, 25; Cline 1997: 148). Oak Tunnel

is 1,198 feet long and Coosa is 2,438 feet. The construction was finished and the track opened on July 1, 1888 (Poor 1889: 680).

Shea/Shay, Dabner/Dabney, and Tommy Walters

By e-mail I submitted the names Dabner/Dabney, Shea/Shay, and Tommy Walters to the Alabama Department of Archives and History, which has Birmingham City Directories for the years 1888–90. Norwood Kerr responded:

> I checked in the Birmingham city directories for 1888 and found a Frederick Y. Dabney listed as chief engineer, C & W RR. No Sheas/Shays at all and no Tommy/Thomas Walter(s).
>
> The 1889 B'ham city directory had no Dabneys; a Morgan Shea, listed as a machinist with A[la.] G[reat] S[outhern] RR; and a Thomas Walters listed as a boilermaker with Crellin & Nalls, a B'ham boilermaking firm.
>
> (Kerr 2001)

In 1887 the chief engineer of the C & W is listed as "Dabney, Geo Y, Jackson block, bds Florence Hotel" (Anson 1887). The first name is an error—a newspaper says, ". . . F. Y. Dabney, chief engineer of the Columbus and Western Railway, has returned from a trip of inspection over that road. He is stopping at the Florence" (Anon 1887a). William Shea ("wks Birmingham Rolling Mill Co.") and Ruffin Johnson ("wks Bham Ice Factory") appear in the 1886 Birmingham City Directory (Richards and Richards 1886).

Here are candidates for *all three* of the people—Shea, Dabney, and Tommy Walters—mentioned by five informants, and a candidate for Rubin Johnson as well. As chief engineer for the C & W, Frederick Y. Dabney was in charge of construction. William Shea worked in metal processing in 1886; Morgan Shea worked for a railroad company (A G S) in 1889, after the C & W construction was finished; and Thomas Walters's business then was also railroad related.

Frederick Yeamans Dabney and the C & W

A www search soon turned up a church bulletin mentioning the memory of a Frederick Yeamans Dabney, but the page had changed since indexing.

Fortunately, Google keeps a cache of each page it scans, so I was able to read that, get the name of the writer, and search Dogpile's white pages on line to get a telephone number. I was soon speaking with great-grandsons and other relatives of Frederick Yeamans Dabney (ca. 1834– ca. 1900), civil engineer. The information below is from them as well as several webpages.

The Dabneys of Virginia are an influential and distinguished family of political leaders, planters, and professionals. They were in Virginia by 1664 (Smedes 1998: 8). Frederick Yeamans Dabney was born in Virginia, but his father and uncle, Judge Philip Augustine Lee Dabney (1800–1879) and Thomas Smith Gregory Dabney (1798–1885), respectively, moved their families in late 1835 from Gloucester County, Virginia, to Mississippi. Augustine went to Raymond (Hinds County), Thomas to Burleigh Plantation, at Dry Grove (Hinds County), ten miles south of Raymond. Thomas's move was precipitated by his desire to avoid breaking up slave families. He did not think that his Virginia property would continue to support all of them.

Dabneys have taken progressive stands. Thomas S. G. Dabney was noted for his kindness to slaves and they seem to have reciprocated (Rowland 1925: 648, 650).

> At St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Raymond on May 13, 1874, George H. Jackson, a former slave, "was the first Negro ordained as a deacon by the Episcopal Church in Mississippi and possibly the first in the South. At his side stood his friend and former master, Colonel Thomas Dabney."
>
> (Sewell and Dwight 1984: 334)

In 1914 Moncure Dabney spoke in the Mississippi House of Representatives in favor of women's suffrage (Gonzales 1980: 222) and by 1943 Virginius Dabney was advocating legal desegregation in editorials in the Richmond (Virginia) *Times-Dispatch*. He won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1948 (Dabney 1978).

Fred grew up in Raymond, studied civil engineering at Rensellear, and was in the railroad construction business by 1858, surveying the Gulfport and Ship Island Railroad (Anon no date). As an artillery officer with the Confederate

Army, he rose from third lieutenant to captain. After the Civil War he lived at Crystal Springs (Copiah County), twelve miles south-southeast of Dry Grove, where he was universally known as "Captain Dabney." During the early 1880s he led, as General Manager, the construction of the Vicksburg, Shreveport, and Pacific Railroad (Anon 1883). At least part of this time he lived in Monroe, Louisiana, visiting his family in Crystal Springs as time permitted (Anon 1882). In August 1886, he made a trip to Georgia, possibly in connection with his appointment as Chief Engineer for the C & W (Anon 1886).

Black Dabneys

The slave schedule of the 1860 federal census shows that Thomas Dabney had 154 slaves, several of whom were males thirteen years old or less, candidates for John Henry Dabney if he were forty years old or less at his death in 1887. The same census shows that Augustine Dabney had eight slaves, one a mulatto male, age four, another a black male, age five, also candidates for John Henry.

The 1870 census lists a Henry Dabney, black, twenty years old, "works on farm," living with his wife Margaret in Copiah County, Mississippi, a specific candidate for John Henry. Henry Dabney married Margaret Foston on November 4, 1869, in Copiah County, Mississippi (Murray 1980?).

World War I registration records list black Dabneys living in Copiah and Hinds Counties (Banks no date-a; Banks no date-b).

Other Alabama Claims

There is additional testimonial support for the Alabama claims. Neither Johnson nor Chappell seems to have been aware, when writing his book, of a persistent legend of John Henry among residents of Leeds, Alabama, and employees of the C of G, the 1895 successor to the Central Railroad of Georgia, which had earlier absorbed the C & W.

> "Jawn Henry" is no mere fiction hero, for in the mountain side near Leeds, at the east end of our Oak Mountain tunnel, there stands a monument to him—the last steel he drove before he fell dead, standing in the hole into which he pounded it with his twelve pound hammer.

> As reported by our Road Supervisor J. Morgan of Leeds, Ala., the legend about Jawn Henry is as follows. He was a giant, standing 6 feet 4 inches in his sox feet. He had made himself famous in reconstruction days when the "Big Bend" tunnel was cut through the Alleghany Mountains on the road built from Richmond to Cincinnati, now the Chesapeake & Ohio. Among his race in the Virginia mountains he was known as the greatest steel driver in history. Hearing of work on another railroad farther south, (the old Columbus & Western, now a part of our line) he came to Oak Mountain tunnel and whipped steel there. Here too he won the fame and admiration of his race, and one day, so legend has it, while whipping down a steel at the east end of the tunnel he worked so hard and fast that the steel melted at the point and stuck. This is reputed to have had something to do with Old Jawn Henry's death, for he dropped dead with hammer in hand at the side of this drill which still sticks in the hole he was driving. And around Leeds his race claim that if you bother that drill still standing there after forty-two years or more, that the spirit of old Jawn Henry will come out and put a spell on you.
>
> (Anon 1930: 9)

This is a fascinating blend of Big Bend and Alabama legends.

This article (Anon 1930) includes a photograph of the only John Henry artifact of which I am aware, the steel drill referred to in the quotation, which was then sticking up in the rock outside the east end of Oak Tunnel (Figure 1).

The article also includes a text, "Jawn Henry," sixteen stanzas, sent to the editors by Peter Brannon. Johnson (1929: 25-26) noted, in defense of Big Bend Tunnel, that many versions of "John Henry" contain something like "'Big Bend Tunnel on the C. and O. Road / Is going to be the death of me,'" while he (Johnson) had never seen any such reference to "any of the Alabama places mentioned." In fact, Brannon's text contains, "'The Central o' Georgia Rail Road / Gonna be th' death o' me.'" It goes on to describe the race with the steam drill.

Although Johnson corresponded with Brannon, he does not appear to

FIGURE 1.

"A CLOSE UP VIEW OF DRILL Steel drill standing for more than forty years in mountain side at east end of our Oak Mountain Tunnel near Leeds, Ala. on our Columbus-Birmingham main line. This is the steel drill referred to in the accompanying folk song" (Anon 1930). The view is from a point near the top of the cut on the right side of the track, facing the portal. (From a scan prepared by the Library Photographic Service, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Used by permission.)

have received Brannon's text until after his book was published. A copy of the Central of Georgia Magazine article is in Johnson's manuscript papers at the University of North Carolina. It appears that Johnson continued to collect John Henry information for his files but never again published on the subject, turning his attention largely to the sociology of race relations.

In 1955 Warren Musgrove called the Leeds–Dunnavant area "John Henry country" (Musgrove 1955). He reported part of an interview with Mrs. C. T. Davis, who claimed that the "straight" of the John Henry story is that his "boss man killed him in Mississippi after he left here." Regardless of the merits of the homicide claim, this is striking support for Spencer's belief that John Henry was from Mississippi, where Captain Dabney also lived.

The Alabama legend persists to this day. Referring to Oak Tunnel, Jerry Voyles wrote to me,

> . . . My home is less than a mile from the tunnel. My family spent years with the old Seaboard Air Line Railroad, including my father who spent 44 years with Seaboard. Upon moving to that location, my father advised me that the south end of the tunnel (the end where the picture was taken) was the location where John Henry died. Apparently, the story has been passed down from a long line of Central Of Georgia workers. . . . Local descendents of old railroad workers in Leeds say the story is true.
>
> (Voyles 2001)

The *Birmingham News* recently carried an article stating that "Marie Cromer, Revis Brasher and Glenn Spruiell are convinced that Henry, immortalized in song for a battle against a steam-powered drilling machine, drove steel in Leeds during the late 1880s" (Pate 2001). According to this article, the steel drill that once stuck in a rock at Oak Tunnel is no longer there but is in the possession of the Little family. For years Cromer has pressed for a John Henry statue at Leeds.

A recent article, "John Henry—Steel Driving Man or Legend," won Kelly Love and the *Leeds News* a third-place award for "Best News Feature Story, Division D" (Anon 2001a).

In remarks before the Leeds Historical Society, on February 6, 2002, Dr. Carl Marbury told of an ancestor, Ciscero Davis, who worked hauling away rock debris (the job of a "mucker") during the construction of the C & W near Dunnavant, Alabama, in 1887–88. According to stories handed down in the family from Davis, steel-driving contests were popular and a man named "John" always won.

This confirms other testimony of John Henry's skill and existence in Alabama. However, the Marbury family has not connected "John" with John Henry and they preserve no stories of a contest with a steam drill. This indicates that their tradition is not "contaminated" with "outside" tales of John Henry.

It also raises the possibility that the legendary steel driver's name was simply "John," not "John Henry" Dabney. "John Henry" could be a mutation of "John Dabney." "John Henry" is much more familiar and it sounds a lot like "John Dabney."

Evaluation of the Alabama Claims

To borrow a phrase from Legman (1992b: 607), the testimony of C. C. Spencer is "dripping with authenticity." In addition to his initial report, he provided more when asked. He claimed to have been an eyewitness to John Henry's race with the steam drill. Consistent with that, he provided incredibly detailed information, giving the place; the names of some nearby localities; the year, month, and day; John Henry's last name; how he got that name; his height, weight, color, and minimum age; where he was from; the name of the railroad for which he worked; how the race came about; the names of the contractors; the terms of the wager; the weight of John Henry's hammer; the depths of the holes drilled; where the steam-drill agent was from; the time it took to prepare for the race; the name of John Henry's helper; how they revived John Henry; what his wife did at the scene; what he said as he was dying; and what his wife did after his death.

Spencer's testimony is supported by two others, Barker and Cummings. No wonder Johnson felt that the Alabama claims deserved careful attention. No doubt he would have pursued the matter further had he known in a timely fashion about the persistent tradition around Leeds and among C of

G employees.

Checking Spencer's testimony against established facts, we quickly spot several errors: (1) "Holly" Springs instead of "Crystal" Springs," (2) "Cruzee" instead of "Coosa," (3) A G S instead of C & W, (4) Coosa ("Cruzee") instead of Oak Tunnel, (5) "Dabner" instead of "Dabney," (6) 1882 instead of 1887, and (7) Red Mountain to the north instead of west of the work site. Spencer was a teenager in 1887 and as he said, "I feel sure that you do not expect one's mind to be clear concerning the minor things which were connected with this story forty-four years after the Actor has passed from the stage . . . I kept no diary in those days. . . ." I agree. Such discrepancies are to be expected.

Errors two, five, and seven are trivial. Errors two and five are commonplace examples of misreproduction. Error seven, confusing directions, happens all the time.

Error three is understandable. The A G S was then an active railroad company in Alabama. Spencer probably worked for it at some time. There were so many railroad companies, and they rearranged themselves so often, through creation, bankruptcy, and merger, that it would be hard for anyone to keep them all straight.

Error six is one of several examples of Spencer's slight misreckoning of years. He also placed the construction of the C & O in 1859–69, instead of 1870–72, erring systematically in giving years that were a little too early. Barker admitted that he couldn't recall the exact year. Cummings hit the nail on the head, 1887. Spencer and Barker were not far off.

Errors one and four may not be errors at all, but if they are, they are easily understood. Regarding error one, Frederick Dabney lived at Crystal Springs. His father and uncle, the latter with a large plantation, lived nearby, at Raymond and Dry Grove. If John Henry were born a slave to a Dabney family, as Spencer believed, and if he worked for Frederick Dabney, it seems likely that he would have been born and later lived in the vicinity of Crystal Springs. Holly Springs is not ruled out rigorously, but there was no Dabney plantation there and it is in a distant part of the state (near Memphis). Spencer probably got his Mississippi "Springs" towns confused.

Regarding error four, Cummings and Central of Georgia Magazine place the contest at Oak Mountain, as do locals today. Spencer and Barker say that

John Henry worked at Coosa ("Cruzee"/"Cursey") Mountain but they don't say where the contest occurred. The tunnels through these mountains were being constructed at the same time, and they are only two miles apart. It seems likely that track was laid between the east portal of Oak Tunnel and the north portal of Coosa Tunnel before the tunnels themselves were completed. This would have facilitated the movement of men, equipment, and supplies between the two tunnels, using handcarts or even small powered carts. All of the steel drivers probably worked at both tunnels. John Henry could have been working at Coosa Tunnel, but he might have gone to Oak Tunnel for the contest.

Coosa Tunnel (Figure 2) was the greater construction challenge, so it was probably better known. Its completion delayed the opening of the line by months. "The Coosa Mountain tunnel on the Columbus and Western railroad has been driven into the mountain a distance of 1,300 feet. The contractors have encountered a peculiar hard granite in the tunnel, which has been extremely difficult to handle" (Anon 1887b). "The completion of the road to Birmingham, which has been delayed by the Coosa Mountain Tunnel, is expected early in the spring" (Belknap 1887: 29). "Maj. Belknap received a message from the chief engineer of the Columbus and Western Railroad, that the Coosa Tunnel, the last link in the Birmingham Chain, will be ready for the track by June 10th" (Anon 1888).

What did Spencer get right? (1) There *is* a Holly Springs, Mississippi. (2) There *is* an A G S. (3) There *is* a Coosa ("Cruzee") Mountain. (4) It *is* in Alabama. (5) There *is* a railroad tunnel through it. (6) It's construction *was* begun at about the time Spencer recalled (off by five years). (7) A man named Dabney ("Dabner") *was* in charge of the job (Chief Engineer). (8) There *were* men named Shea in railroad work in Birmingham at about that time. (9) There *was* a Dabney family in Mississippi. (10) They *did* have slaves. (11) Coosa Tunnel *is* fairly close to the Georgia line. (12) Rising Fawn ("Riseingforn") *is* a town in Georgia, not too far away. (13) Red Mountain *is* about 15 miles from Coosa Tunnel. (14) There *is* an Elkhorn Tunnel on the Norfolk ("Narfork") & Western line. (15) It *was* constructed at a time, 1886-88, when workers could have moved from Alabama to West Virginia to work on it (Brown 2001; McMillan 2001). Evidently John Henry's contest and death made such a deep impression on the teenage Spencer that in his old age he could recall the date

FIGURE 2.

"COOSA TUNNEL, COLUMBUS & WESTERN RAILROAD. There is some heavy work on the Columbus & Western Railroad. The approaches and tunnel at Coosa Mountain are well brought out in the picture. The rock cutting at the entrance to the tunnel has been very, very heavy, but the chief work on the line is the tunnel which bores the mountain at this point. It is situated between Vandiver and Dunavant stations. It is 2,438 feet long—or nearly half a mile. This tunnel was cut in 1887 and 1,850 feet of it were lined with brick in 1892. The size of the tunnel may be judged from the figure of the man who stands at the opening. This is one of the points of interest on the road between Columbus, Ga., and Birmingham, Ala., which is part of the Savannah & Western System" (Stovall and Havens 1895). This is the north portal.

(September 20), or at least he thought he could.

This is impressive. Together with supporting testimony from Barker, Cummings, Central of Georgia Magazine, and local tradition at Leeds, Alabama, it all adds up to a remarkable confirmation of Spencer's story.

Was "John Henry" Sung Before 1887?

If it could be demonstrated that "John Henry" was around before 1887, the Alabama claims would be disproved. There *is* testimony to that effect. Chappell gives two reports stating that it was heard during the construction of Big Bend Tunnel, another saying "before 1880," and another 1881.

However, false memories of age arise easily, and it seems that the errors invariably lie on the side of placing events too early, just as Spencer did in connection with several events (see above). This is exemplified by "Frankie and Albert/Johnny" (Laws I 3), for which there are reports that it was extant as far back as the Civil War, despite the fact that the happenings described in the song occurred in 1899. As Legman (1992a: 479–80) states in explaining why Frankie Baker lost her invasion of privacy lawsuit in 1942, ". . . there has been an unprecedented amount of sub-scholarly bluff on the subject of this song." This includes the assertion by Sigmund Spaeth that the song derives from Frankie Silver's "axe-murder of her husband in 1831" and that by Thomas Beer that it "was known on the Mississippi in the 50s, and chanted by Federal troops besieging Vicksburg in 1863," both of which are nonsense. "Frankie" does not just *accidentally* contain the first and last names of all three of the historical main characters, Frankie Baker (the full name is frequently given as the title and rarely in the body of the song text), Al Britt (as "Albert"), and Alice Pryor (as "Alice Pry," "Alice Fry," "Nellie Bly," or some such).

Of seven reports given by Johnson, none place "John Henry" before 1887, and of sixteen given by Chappell, twelve give definite dates after 1887 or approximate dates consistent with that. Johnson informants say "1887," "a few years later" (than 1887), "early nineties," and "1904," while Chappell informants say "about forty-five years ago" (about 1884), "as a boy" (W. C. Handy, who was fourteen years old in 1887), "1888," "40 years ago" (about 1889) (two reports), "1890," "31 years ago" (about 1898), "about 1899 or 1900," "about the year 1900," "1900-01," "about 1904," and "1909." R. H. Pope ties it to a

move: "I went to Georgia 1888, and that song was being sung by all the young men . . . He was a negro and a real man so I was told."

The great bulk of the testimonial evidence is consistent with a genesis in 1887 or shortly thereafter. Further, Pope's statement ties it to a region of the country close to eastern Alabama and affirms that John Henry was historical. All of this is consistent with the Alabama claims.

W. T. Blankenship

Who was W. T. Blankenship, author, printer, or publisher of the Blankenship broadside, "John Henry, The Steel Driving Man"? There is an active mailing list devoted to Blankenship genealogy (Anon 2001b). Most of my information is from list members. James Blankenship regularly updates a complied genealogy, which he provided (Blankenship 2001).

There have been several men named William Thomas Blankenship, and one named William Tyndal Blankenship, of appropriate ages to have been the W. T. Blankenship of the broadside. However, I have not yet found anything to suggest that any of them is the author/printer/publisher of the Blankenship broadside. Even so, family history and traits make it likely that one or more Blankenships were involved with "John Henry" from its beginning.

The Blankenships came from England to Virginia in the late seventeenth century. By the early nineteenth century they were in Kentucky, North Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia as well.

In Georgia, the family formed strong alliances with Cherokees—a number of Blankenships are on historic rolls of Cherokee tribes (Blankenship 1992). In 1836, when the Cherokees were about to be removed from Georgia to Oklahoma (on the "Trail of Tears," 1838-39), John Blankenship, whose wife was Cherokee, arranged for some Cherokees and Blankenships to relocate in recently vacated Creek lands in Coosa County, Alabama. Indians and whites would be married there and Henry Blankenship, a county commissioner, would help get clear titles to land (Blankenship 2001). Today there are many Blankenships in Coosa, Talladega, Shelby, and Jefferson Counties, Alabama.

The Blankenship clan is musical. Sharp collected ballads and songs from Blankenships from North Carolina and Tennessee (1932: I-131, 337, 357; II-129). From the mailing list, I received several reports of Blankenship string

bands and contemporary professional musicians. Cohen (1981: 540-541) describes a North Carolina Blankenship family group.

I was excited when I discovered that William Thomas Blankenship (1875–1946, Franklin County, Virginia) had a musical uncle, John Henry Blankenship (1843–1909, Bedford County, Virginia). Perhaps he could have been the John Henry of legend, memorialized in verse and song by his nephew, whether or not there had been a historical race with a steam drill. I have not ruled this out, but I have set it aside in favor of Alabama and John Henry Dabney.

Blankenships and "John Henry"

Starting with Coosa County, Alabama, and going north and west, one comes first to Talladega (north) and Shelby (northwest) and then to St. Clair (north) and Jefferson (northwest) Counties. In 1887-88 the C & W built their line from Goodwater (Coosa County), through Childersburg (Talladega County) and Sterrett (Shelby County), to Leeds and Birmingham (Jefferson County). This must have been a good employment opportunity, and it is plausible that Blankenships worked on this job. One or more Blankenships might have witnessed John Henry's death or heard about it from witnesses. In any event, the proximity of the Blankenships to the alleged site of John Henry's death, the general musicality of the family, and the existence of the Blankenship broadside make it plausible that a Blankenship might have written "John Henry" and that Blankenships were important in its propagation.

A Scenario

To flesh out a scenario, I accept Spencer's tale, corrected for the clear and probable errors described above.

Not long before the Civil War, John Henry was born a slave to a Dabney family in Mississippi—Thomas Dabney at Burleigh Plantation, Dry Grove, or possibly Augustine Dabney at Raymond. He took the family name.

Augustine's son Frederick Yeamans Dabney was about twenty years older than John Henry. He was close to his uncle Thomas, so he probably knew John Henry as a child, regardless of which Dabney owned him.

After the Civil War, John Henry went to work with Captain Fred Dabney and learned steel driving from members of his crew. Captain Dabney's business,

railroad construction, took him from job to job, but he maintained his family's home in Crystal Springs, Mississippi, while he traveled. John Henry, his best steel driver, and John Henry's wife, a cook, went with Captain Dabney. John Henry also called Crystal Springs home.

In late 1886 or early 1887 they came to Alabama to build the C & W line from Goodwater to Birmingham. John Henry worked on Oak and Coosa Tunnels.

Coosa Tunnel proved to be a formidable job. Slow progress threw the project behind. A New York agent for a company selling steam drills heard of this, or was contacted by Captain Dabney, who thought that it might be economical to get a steam drill to speed the job.

In talking with the agent, Captain Dabney bragged that he had a man who could beat the steam drill. Being confident that this was untrue and anxious to prove his point, the agent offered to donate the steam drill if Dabney's man beat it.

The contest was scheduled and the arrangements made over the course of several weeks. Word got around and a crowd of several hundred showed up at the east portal of Oak Tunnel, probably on September 20, 1887, but perhaps on some other day in 1887–88.

In a contest that lasted all day, John Henry beat the steam drill, but at the end he collapsed, possibly of heat stroke. He was revived, blind and dying. His wife, called from the railroad camp, arrived in time to cradle John Henry's head as he died.

Captain Dabney arranged for John Henry's body to be taken back to Crystal Springs for burial. John Henry's relatives came from Mississippi to Alabama to escort it home. Alternatively, if John Henry was buried near the place he died, his relatives came from Mississippi to his funeral.

At least one Alabama Blankenship witnessed John Henry's death, heard about it from a witness, or read about it in a newspaper. He or she, or someone else, wrote a ballad that Blankenships helped propagate.

"John Henry" and the Scenario

If we accept this scenario, we can see aspects of "John Henry" in new light.

(1) Uncle Dave Macon sang this opening verse (Johnson 1929: 116-117).

> People out West heard of John Henry's death,
> Couldn' hardly stay in bed,
> Monday mornin' caught that East-bound train,
> Goin' where John Henry's dead.

Why should people "out west" be especially interested in John Henry's death? They were his friends and relatives in Mississippi.

(2) Numerous versions of "John Henry" detail conversations between John Henry and "his captain." This admits only one interpretation, common among laboring black southerners: "his captain" was his boss on the job.

Some versions speak instead of "the captain," which admits the same interpretation but allows another. The reference could be specifically to Captain Dabney, Chief Engineer for the C & W. John Henry and Captain Dabney had known one another and worked together for some time, so it would be natural that they should converse in this manner. This is supported by the fact that in "John Henry" the reference is rarely to the "boss," "foreman," "overseer," etc. Under this interpretation, written or printed versions should capitalize "Captain."

(3) Leon Harris wrote that he first heard "John Henry" in 1904 in Birmingham, Alabama (Johnson 1929: 91). However, the verses he sent Johnson were from Virginia and West Virginia and heard there in 1909–11. Repeatedly, these verses refer to "Cap'n Tommy." "Tommy" is a plausible mutation of "Dabney," both having two syllables, ending with the same sound, and "Tommy" being the more familiar in general speech.

(4) Harris's fifth verse is

> John Henry's cap'n Tommy, -
> V'ginny gave him birth;
> Loved John Henry like his only son,
> And Cap' Tommy was the whitest man on earth.

Captain Fred Dabney *was* born in Virginia. Further, he was close to his uncle Thomas, who was noted for his kindness to his slaves and his friendship with ex-slaves, making it likely that Fred shared those attitudes and could have "Loved John Henry like his only son."

(5) Harris's version contains the line, "Dinnahs done when Lucy pull the c'od," where Lucy is John Henry's "woman." Spencer said that John Henry's wife cooked for some of the men.

(6) Burl McPeak's version contains the line, "Is the place where John Henry went blind" (Chappell 1933: 109). Spencer said that after John Henry fainted and was revived, his words were, "send for my wife, I am blind and dying."

(7) Luboff and Stracke (1965: 208) give a version containing the following verse.

> John Henry swung that hammer
> An' brought the hammer down.
> A man in Chattanooga, miles away,
> Said, "Listen to that rumblin' sound."

Hearing John Henry in Chattanooga is a plausible tall tale for hammering at Dunnavant, Alabama, 135 miles away, but it is a very unlikely choice for southern West Virginia.

(8) Rich Amerson (Courlander and Brooks 1960: 32–40) sang these lines

> When Henry was 'tween them mountains,
> The Captain saw him goin' down

and others placing John Henry "'tween them mountains" when he died.

Oak and Coosa are the only mountains near Leeds, Alabama. Each is a southwest-to-northeast oriented ridge. Portal-to-portal, the tunnels through them are almost exactly two miles apart.

"'Tween them mountains" is probably not a useful description around Big Bend, since nearly every place there is between mountains. At Leeds, "'tween them mountains" describes the tiny town of Dunnavant, four miles south of

Leeds, perfectly.

Local legend says that John Henry raced the steam drill just outside the east portal of the "Dunnavant tunnel" (Oak). This spot is between the tops of the ridges of Oak and Coosa Mountains.

(9) Harvey Hicks gave Chappell (1933: 105–106) the following couplet.

> John Henry died on a Tuesday,
> It looked very much like rain

According to Spencer, John Henry died on September 20. The only year in which the construction of the C & W near Leeds was in progress in September is 1887. September 20, 1887, *was* Tuesday.

Two John Henrys?

John Henry Martin is named as the legendary John Henry in several 1920s letters to Guy Johnson that are now in his manuscript papers at the University of North Carolina. In *Singa Hipsy Doodle* (Parsons, W.Va., 1971), Marie Boette quotes an article by Kyle McCormick, director of the West Virginia Department of Archives and History, from the Parkersburg (W.Va.) *Sentinel*, November 7, 1957, to the effect that John Henry Martin, "a giant Negro," was a "very valuable" steel driver at Big Bend Tunnel during its construction in 1870–72. Records then in the possession of the grandsons of James Twohig, "contractor's foreman on the Big Bend job," are said to document John Henry Martin. He did not race a steam drill and his death was from "natural causes" many years later.

This suggests a scenario for the rise of the legend of John Henry in West Virginia. The ballad was being sung in Georgia by 1888 and soon reached the Big Bend area. When it arrived, people there still remembered John Henry Martin and they associated him with the song, assigning to him the deeds of John Henry Dabney and localizing the ballad to "Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O Road."

Conclusions

So far, no definite documentation of John Henry himself has been found. This leaves room for argument from those who may believe that John Henry never existed or that he raced a steam drill elsewhere. However, to make such a claim one would have to disprove, explain away, or dismiss the network of evidence, detailed here, that places John Henry on the C & W in Alabama in 1887-88. In particular, one would have to argue that C. C. Spencer is not a credible witness and that he grafted a fictional tale of being an eyewitness to John Henry's death onto some arcane factual knowledge of Mississippi Dabneys, not obtained from John Henry, and the construction of the C & W.

However, of all of the testimony gathered by Johnson and Chappell, that of Spencer is the most detailed, giving the impression of authority. He claims to have been present when John Henry raced the steam drill in Alabama. Thus, he is the "star witness" on this subject.

When checked against facts that can be determined from other sources, Spencer's story is found to contain some errors, which threw Johnson and Chappell off the Alabama trail. Even so, these errors are reasonable for someone recounting, after forty-odd years, an experience from his teens, and they are easily corrected.

What Spencer got right is far more impressive. Among other things, he gave the name of Coosa Mountain in Alabama; placed it near Red Mountain and Rising Fawn, Georgia; named Dabney as a railroad construction boss there; and stated that there was a Dabney plantation in Mississippi, all of which is correct.

This lends great credibility to his story. That credibility is enhanced by the independent testimony of Barker and Cummings, by the statement of Davis that places John Henry in Mississippi, and by the persistent tradition, around Leeds, that John Henry raced a steam drill, probably outside the east portal of Oak Mountain Tunnel, Shelby County, Alabama, during the construction of the C & W in 1887–88.

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correspondents on mailing lists; especially the ballad scholars, pre-war blues, Blankenship, and Alabama rails lists; and newsgroups, especially rec.music.country.old-time. James and Tammy Blankenship and Sue B. Altice were especially helpful with Blankenship family information, as were Rebecca Drake; David, Fred, Lucius, and Richard Dabney; Beverly D. Bragg; and Susan D. Rawls with information on Dabneys. Archie Green, Joey Brackner, and Pat Conte generously shared John Henry material. George Koch told me about hand drilling. Thomas W. Dixon, Jr., chairman and president of The Chesapeake and Ohio Historical Society, gave me valuable information about the construction of the C & O. Jerry Voyles showed me around Leeds and Dunnavant, and Marie Cromer shared her John Henry information. Other contributions are acknowledged in references. I am grateful to all these and others. ■

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Recording Review

The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 1. Alabama Traditions 201. Produced and digitally mastered by Steve Grauberger at the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, 2001. CD Recording with liner notes, available from the Alabama Folklife Association, $12.50.

Mike Luster

The first in a projected series of recordings of traditional music of Alabama, *The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 1* offers a diverse collection of singing games, work songs, mariachi, blues, bluegrass, shape-note hymns and other forms of sacred and secular music. It begins, appropriately enough, with the celebratory sounds of the Excelsior Band of Mobile that has been leading Mobile's Mardi Gras parades since 1883. Their sound is Creole brass band music, that precursor and parallel to jazz and the traditional soundtrack for the cycle of celebration and reflection, of birth and death. Grounded in an urban ethnic community, the Excelsior Band is a wonderful introduction and counterbalance to a collection that keeps mostly to the rural communities and congregations. Wonderfully diverse, the collection draws on the work of the state's finest collectors, archives, and events.

One of the earliest tracks, that of a group of children singing a play song, "Hey, Hey Logan," recorded near York, Alabama, by noted folklorist John Lomax in 1940, is a close relative of the song "Sometimes" as sung on the Georgia Sea Islands by the great Bessie Jones (recorded by Lomax's son Alan, and recently sampled by techno-dance artist Moby). Other treasures from archival collections include Tom Bell's 1940 juke joint dance piece "Cross

E Shimmy Dance Tune" and a fine work song recording from the docks of Mobile in 1937.

While there are other unexpected treasures, like the Baldwin County Polka Band, Mariachi Garibaldi, and a Lao salawan by Reagan Ngamvilay and Khamsing Darapheth, the core of the collection is an in-depth exploration of Alabama's justly famous sacred music traditions. There are fine demonstrations of lining hymns, unaccompanied Primitive Baptist singing, Southern Gospel quartets, "Dr. Watts," bluegrass gospel, African American quartets, and shape-note singing in both the seven- and four-note traditions. For some of these, there are examples from both African American and Anglo American traditions making the collection both a fine introduction and an excellent teaching tool.

If volume one is any indication, the series *Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation,* currently projected at some ten hours of music, should prove a peerless overview of one state's cultural legacy. The recording was funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and produced through the auspices of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture. The introduction by Hank Willett and the notes by Steve Grauberger are especially welcome additions. ■

Recording Review

Alabama: From Lullabies to Blues Rounder 1829. Rounder Records, One Camp Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140. www.rounder.com. CD with liner notes, $15.98.

Joyce Cauthen

Recorded mainly on a simple disc recording machine in the living room of Ruby Pickens Tartt of Livingston, Alabama, in the years 1937 through '41, it is remarkable that this singing can sound so magnificent today. *Alabama: From Lullabies to Blues* brings to life the music of Vera Ward Hall, Doc Reed, Rich Amerson, Blind Jesse Harris, and other African-American residents of Sumter County, recorded by John Lomax, his wife Ruby, and son Alan for the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song. Digitally remastered so that the pops, bumps, and hisses inherent in the old recordings are far in the background, this CD displays the talents of twenty-two individuals and three groups as they share with us a variety of musical forms—blues, ballads, moans, work songs, play-party games, lullabies plus a pinch of storytelling, and harmonica, accordion, and blues guitar. Performances selected for the CD show the breadth of the area's folk music traditions and the snippets of conversation accompanying many of them help us get a sense of the performers' personalities and the enthusiasm with which they approached the recording process.

Each of the thirty-two selections is worthy of admiration, but there are some real standouts for me. I like the opening cut that presents Vera Hall singing in her incomparable contralto voice "Another Man Done Gone," a subtly chilling song about men escaping from prison. I also like her version of "Boll Weevil Blues" which shows the range and control of this gifted singer. I love

Rich Brown's opening of the well-known "Alabama Bound" with a plaintive sound suggestive of a field holler. Maybe my favorite is Mary McClintock's version of "Go to Sleep, Little Baby," especially at the end when she sings it in an enthusiastic stage whisper. I like the harmony singing on "Ain't Going to Rain No More" by eight unidentified girls at the Kirby Industrial School in Atmore, one of the few recordings on the CD not made in Sumter County. I'm fascinated by "Billy Goat Latin," a work song employing a rhythmic secret language. Lomax described it as "a queer, explosive concatenation of sounds, which come mainly through the nose of the performer." And I'm delighted by Harriet McClintock's work song "Gin the Cotton," when at Lomax's prompting she describes "whooping and hollering" in the cotton fields. You will doubtlessly have other favorites and, next time I listen to it, I will too.

The CD is accompanied by forty pages of liner notes written by Jerrilyn McGregory, Ph.D. They include detailed information about the Lomaxes' collecting process, lyrics and interpretations of each song, biographical information on Ruby Pickens Tarrt, and a selected bibliography. *Alabama: From Lullabies to Blues* is part of the "Deep River of Song" series featuring field recordings of African-American performers drawn from the Alan Lomax collection and issued on the Rounder label. CDs presenting Black "Texicans," Virginians, Georgians, Bahamians, and Mississippians, as well as those focusing on prison recordings and on black Appalachian string band musicians have been issued thus far. A CD exclusively featuring Vera Hall is in the works.

One of the good things in life today is the fact that field recordings once stored tightly in the Library of Congress are becoming more and more accessible to all. You can visit the John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip collection in Library of Congress's Southern Mosaic collection (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html) but that would be very different from making these singers and their songs part of your daily life by playing this CD on your car or home stereo. ■

Contributors' Notes

Lynn Abbott is an independent music researcher who lives in New Orleans. His writings, including collaborations with Doug Seroff, have appeared in *American Music*, *American Music Research Journal*, *78 Quarterly*, *The Jazz Archivist* and elsewhere. "The Life and Death of Butler 'String Beans' May" is an excerpt from Abbott and Seroff's book-in-progress, detailing the commercial ascendancy of the blues.

James Patrick Cather is one of Alabama's best-known rare book dealers. He is a lifelong Birmingham resident and a partner in Cather & Brown Books, a firm specializing in out-of-print books about Alabama or by Alabama authors. He has published several monographs and written articles for *Music Memories Magazine* and other periodicals. He was educated at Jacksonville State University and the University of Alabama in Birmingham.

John Garst, emeritus professor of chemistry, University of Georgia, Athens, was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, in Hinds County, where John Henry was born, probably. He has maintained a sixty-year interest in American vernacular music. Recently, he has studied the historical backgrounds of several songs and ballads, including "Wayfaring Stranger," "Man of Constant Sorrow," "Ella Speed," "Delia," and "Batson." This work is greatly assisted by the internet.

Steve Grauberger works as a Folklife Specialist for the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture (ACTC). He has an MA in ethnomusicology from the University of Hawaii. He did his thesis on the organology of the Cebuano diatonic harp in the Phillipines with the help of a Fulbright scholarship. He worked for two years in the Wiregrass region of Alabama doing a survey of ten

counties. From this research he produced the documentary CD *Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass*. Working for the ACTC he produced another compilation, *The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 1*, the first in an ongoing series of CD releases.

Willie Earl King is a blues musician from the Old Memphis community of Pickens County. He is known for his community activism, concern for youth, and his devotion to his music. In 1981, he helped found the Rural Members Association, which produces educational programs for local youth. His annual Freedom Creek Festival brings blues lovers from all over the country to west Alabama. Willie has participated in the educational programs of The Alabama Blues Project. His recent CD *I Am the Blues* has been well received. He was nominated for a W. C. Handy award for "Best New Blues Artist of 2000."

Axel Küstner is a postal worker in Gandersheim, Germany. He became enamored of blues music in 1970 and soon began seeking out great blues artists such as Big Joe Williams, Doctor Ross, Sunnyland Slim and Robert Pete Williams at concerts in Germany. His love of this music eventually brought him to the United States where he continues to visit every year or so documenting blues artists. He has produced several recordings including two of Big Joe Williams: *Back to the Roots* (1978) and *Field Recordings* (1980). For this issue of *Tributaries*, Axel has contributed some recent photographs from his documentary trips to Alabama.

Jerrilyn McGregory is associate professor of English at Florida State University. A specialist in folklore, she is the author of *Wiregrass Country*, the first holistic study of the folklife in a little known region of the South. She is currently at work on an ethnographic study of the Wiregrass region's African-American sacred music traditions, focusing on the social aspect of the music.

Kevin Nutt is an independent researcher and writer living in Montgomery, Alabama. He also produces two weekly vintage African-American gospel radio programs. "Old Time Gospel Music" airs on Montgomery's WMGY and "Sinner's Crossroads" airs on WFMU in the New York City area.

DOUG SEROFF is an independent research/writer living in Greenbrier, Tennessee. His work with African-American gospel harmony quartets has resulted in the production of record albums, documentary videos, and special concert presentations, including the landmark 1980 *Birmingham Quartet Reunion*. He has written numerous journal articles, book chapters, and program booklets on aspects of black folk and popular music, and in collaboration with Lynn Abbott, Seroff has recently completed a book, *"Out of Sight"—The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895,* scheduled for publication in late 2002 by University Press of Mississippi.

Reviewers

JOYCE CAUTHEN is one of Alabama's foremost scholars of traditional folk music. Best known for her book, *With Fiddle and Well-Rosined Bow: Old-Time Fiddling in Alabama*, she also produced the documentary CDs *Possum Up A Gum Stump: Home, Field & Commercial Recordings of Alabama Fiddlers*, *John Alexander's Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama,* and edited the book and CD *Benjamin Lloyd's Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*. She is the executive director of the Alabama Folklife Association.

MIKE LUSTER is the director of the Louisiana Folklife Festival, host of two public radio programs, and works on the weekly program of legendary gospel deejay, Sister Pearlee Toliver. Before coming to Louisiana, he was a folklife specialist with the North Carolina Maritime Museum and cultural consultant on the feature film *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored.* His work with the musical group the Menhaden Chanteymen of Beaufort, North Carolina, was featured on "CBS Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt" and the recording he produced of the Chanteymen was selected by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress as one of the outstanding recordings of 1990. He was recently featured as an on-camera guide to the music of northern Louisiana in the Robert Mugge film Rhythm 'n Bayous, and was the recipient of the 2001 Special Humanities Award from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

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The publications and recordings below have been produced with the support of the AFA. To order, list the items and quantities desired, include shipping and handling (a flat fee of $2.50 for any number of items), and send a check (payable to AFA; may be combined with membership dues) for the total to the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, 410 North Hull Street, Montgomery, AL 36104. You can also order the following directly from our website at www.alabamafolklife.org.

☐ *Sweet is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* ($20 DVD or VHS, please specify) produced by Erin Kellen and directed by Jim Carnes: In this hour-long video members of Wootten family of Sand Mountain speak of their long and deep involvement with shape-note singing and sing more than a dozen hymns from *The Sacred Harp*. An accompanying booklet provides historical information and further explanation of shape-note traditions.

- ☐ ***Tributaries, Journal of the AFA,*** Vol. 1 ($8). Contains essays on the great shoal fish trap, Mobile Bay jubilees, quilting, occupational folklore, and more.
- ☐ ***Tributaries, Journal of the AFA,*** Vol. 2 ($8). Contains essays on Hank Williams, revival of interest in Indian tribal ancestry, Alabama's outlaws, cultural roles of African-American women in the Wiregrass, and more.
- ☐ ***Tributaries, Journal of the AFA,*** Vol. 3 ($8). Contains essays on graveshelters, the Skyline Farms, the Piney Woods Regional Folklife Project, geophagy, and more.
- ☐ ***Tributaries, Journal of the AFA,*** Vol. 4 ($8). Contains essays on contemporary Christmas curb lights in Birmingham, Creek Indian migration narratives, the Ballad of John Catchings and more.
- ☐ ***The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 1*** ($12.50). This CD is the first in the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture's Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. It presents a delightful and well-recorded variety of children's games, work songs, sacred music, fiddle tunes, blues and other forms of music traditional to Alabama collected by musicologists and folklorists over the last 50 years.
- ☐ ***John Alexander's Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama,*** ($10). This cassette recording features Jefferson County's oldest African American a capella gospel group.
- ☐ ***Jesus Hits like an Atom Bomb,*** ($15). CD version of the Sterling Jubilee cassette described above.
- ☐ ***Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy: Historical Alabama Field Recordings from the Byron Arnold Collection of Traditional Tunes*** ($12.50). This box set includes a 64-page booklet and a cassette featuring field recordings of folk, gospel, and parlor tunes recorded in 1947.
- ☐ ***Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass*** ($10). A CD capturing bluegrass, gospel, blues, and Sacred Harp singing as done in Southeast Alabama.
- ☐ ***The Alabama Sampler*** ($12). A CD featuring live performances at City Stages of Alabama blues, bluegrass, Sacred Harp, Gospel, railroad calls,

etc.

☐ ***Benjamin Lloyd's Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*** ($18 softcover, $25 hardcover). A book of essays exploring Alabama's oldest hymnal, published in 1841, and enclosed CD with twenty examples of ways in which congregations sing from it.

NON-AFA PRODUCTS OF RELATED INTEREST:

☐ ***Rich Amerson*** ($7 for cassette, $10 for CD). Folk tales and songs recorded in Livingston, Alabama, in 1961.

☐ ***Possum Up a Gum Stump: Home, Field and Commercial Recordings of Alabama Fiddlers*** ($9 for cassette, $15 for CD). Contains rare recordings of nineteenth century fiddlers and field recordings of twentieth century fiddlers who played in older styles. Twenty-four-page liner notes.

☐ ***White Spirituals from the Sacred Harp: The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention*** ($10 for cassette, $15 for CD). Alan Lomax recorded these shape-note songs from the Sacred Harp in 1959 in Fyffe, Alabama.

☐ ***The Colored Sacred Harp*** (CD, $15). The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers of Ozark, Alabama, sing from Judge Jackson's 1934 compilation of shape-note songs.

☐ ***Desire for Piety*** (CD, $15). A rare example of black Sacred Harp singing from rural southeast Alabama as sung by the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers.