

Flyright-Matchbox Library of Congress Series
Inset for Volumes Three and Four
(SDM 257 and SDM 258)

A Tribute to Zora Neale Hurston



Zora Neale Hurston, Rochelle French and Gabriel Brown,
Eatonville, Florida, June 1935

Courtesy the Library of Congress

This album is a testimony, not only to some of the finest country blues ever recorded for the Library of Congress, but also the work of one of the most able of all collectors of Afro-American folklore: Zora Neale Hurston. Franz Boas, one of the great American anthropologists, under whose influence Hurston came, wrote of her: 'It is the great merit of Miss Hurston's work that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood. Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanour by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life'.¹

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Florida on 7 January 1903, during the decade that race relations in the United States were most strained. This was also the time when newly-orientated black Americans were beginning to look to themselves, instead of to the white man, as a means of establishing their own identity. Her own story tells us something of the region in which she was later to collect. 'I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black backside of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America. Eatonville is what you might call hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. The town was not in the original plan. It is a by-product of something else.

'The shores of Lake Maitland were beautiful, probably one reason they decided to settle there, on the northern end where one of the old forts, built against the Indians, had stood. It had been commanded by Colonel Maitland, so the lake and the community took their name in memory of him. It was Mosquito County then and the name was just. It is Orange County now for equally good reason. . . . Negroes were found to do the clearing. . . . While the white estates flourished on the three-mile length of Lake Maitland, the Negroes set up their hastily built shacks around St. John's hole, a lake as round as a dollar, and less than half a mile wide. . . . So on 18 August 1886, the Negro town, called Eatonville, after Captain Eaton [who was from one of the two influential white families in Maitland] received its charter of incorporation.'²

Following her mother's death and her father's remarriage, Zora Neale left home at the age of nine and from then on never really stopped wandering. 'From 1912 until her death in 1960, Zora Neale Hurston wandered, rarely remaining in one locality for longer than three years and often disappearing from public view despite her prominence as the author of four novels, two collections of tales, and an autobiography—more books than any other female Afro-American had written.'³ She went to Morgan College, where the Dean was William Pickens. He too was from the south—from Anderson County, South Carolina—and had written his autobiography *The Heir of Slaves*⁴ in 1911. Five years later, he had published *The New Negro*.⁵ This book was part of the wave of black self identity which sprang from the ideas of W. E. B. du Bois and the N.A.A.C.P. Hurston was to reflect much of this 'new Negro' attitude and if not 'the heir of slaves', at least her father was born 'over the creek' in Alabama. From Morgan she

¹ Franz Boas, 'Foreword' to Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules And Men*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1935

² Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks On A Road: An Autobiography*, London, Hutchinson, n.d., pp. 7–10

³ Darwin T. Turner, 'Zora Neale Hurston: The Wandering Minstrel' in *In A Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers And Their Search For Identity*, Carbondale, University of Illinois Press, 1971, pp. 89–90

⁴ William Pickens, *The Heir Of Slaves*, Boston, Pilgrim Press, 1911

⁵ William Pickens, *The New Negro: His Political, Civil And Mental Status And Related Essays*, New York, Neale, 1916.

moved to Howard, the black university in Washington D.C. Once there she came to know Alain Locke, a philosophy professor who was interested in black music.⁶ Sociologist, Charles S. Johnson, then at Fisk University, asked her to write for the black magazine *Opportunity*, and through this she obtained a scholarship to Barnard University, where she was influenced by the anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas. Two weeks before she graduated from Barnard in 1928, Boas informed her that he had arranged a fellowship so that she could collect black folklore.

She collected Bahamian lore, hoodoo lore in New Orleans and worked on material for the *Journal of Negro History*. In 1935 she was offered the opportunity to go south again. 'Miss Barnicle, of New York University, asked me to join her and Alan Lomax on a short bit of research. I was to select the area and contact the subjects. Alan Lomax was joining us with a recording machine. So because I was delirious with joy and pain [she was in the middle of an awkward love-affair], I suddenly decided to leave New York and see if I could come to some decision. . . . Six weeks later I was back in New York.'⁷ This was the field trip that produced the music to be heard on this album.

She continued to write during the 1930s but after 1939 her output began to decrease. Her last book was published in 1948. Two years later she was back in Florida working as a maid. She then seemed to drop out of circulation completely, losing contact with Lomax and even her publisher. Her obituary appeared in February 1960: 'Fort Pierce, Fla., (AP), Zora Neale Hurston, author, died in obscurity and poverty on Jan. 28, it was reported today. Her age was 57. . . . Her funeral expenses were paid by collection and contribution'.⁸

Something of an enigma during her lifetime, she remains no less so to the present day. Writing of her in *Sing Out* in 1960, Alan Lomax stated: 'she was far ahead of her time. In the early '30s there was little or no interest in authentic American folklore and the educated Negro community held Negro folklore in virtual abhorrence. . . . She lived in turpentine camps, travelled in the box car houses of Negro section hands, went fishing with her story tellers and took notes while the laughter rocked the warm southern nights. On Saturday nights she danced in the country "Jooks" and learned the steps herself, along with the songs. . . she was no reserved scientist, but a raconteur, a singer and a dancer who could bring the culture of her people vividly to life'.⁹ The attitude of present day black intelligensia to Hurston may be summed up by Darwin Turner who sees her as 'a blind follower of that social code which approved arrogance toward one's assumed peers and inferiors but requires total psychological commitment to a subservient posture before one's supposed superiors'.¹⁰

One is left with the feeling that she would not have disapproved of the controversy she has left behind. As a collector, she was always more concerned with the content than the clothing. Turner criticizes her for this stating 'there is no evidence of the scholarly procedures which would be expected from a formally trained anthropologist or researcher in folklore'.¹¹ She felt however that it was 'almost useless to collect material to lie upon the shelves of scientific societies'.¹² Turner's statement may well be true but the fact remains that Hurston was able to get at the core of black folklore

⁶ Alain Locke wrote a book on this subject: Alain Locke, *The Negro And His Music*, Washington, D.C., The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936

⁷ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, p. 134

⁸ Alan Lomax, 'Zora Neale Hurston—A Life Of Negro Folklore', *Sing Out*, 10, October–November, 1960, p. 13 and Turner, op. cit., p. 90

⁹ Lomax, op. cit., pp. 12–13

¹⁰ Turner, op. cit., p. 98

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117

¹² Letter to Rosenwald fund, 1934, Robert Hemenway, 'Zora Neale Hurston And The Eatonville Anthropology', in Arna Bontemps, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, New York, Dodd Mead (to be published), p. 208

probably because she forwent these academic attitudes. She knew her people and knew her lore. No-one has ever quite caught the excitement and tension of a country jook¹³ as she did; she was not so much an onlooker making notes but a member of the group expressing something in which she was personally involved.

The compilers of the Florida State Guide, originally published in 1939, were aware of the state's black secular music. 'Music has always been an emotional outlet for the Florida Negro, and his songs have multiplied and shaped themselves to his tasks, his tribulations, and his irrepressible spirits. . . . In Florida's turpentine or sawmill camps, at the docks, prison farms, wherever Negroes work in gangs, singing lightens the drudgery. Songs often punctuate the swing of the axe, thrust of the shovel, or swipe of the hoe. Composed in time of sorrow, joy, work, or imprisonment, they illustrate the Negro's relief in rhythm.'¹⁴ Hurston knew this as well as anyone. 'Joe Clarke's store was the heart and spring of the town. Men sat around the store on boxes and benches and passed this world and the next one through their mouths.'¹⁵ This was why she could gain the confidence of her informants and could collect material in a way that no white ever could have done. 'You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and we tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing . . . he can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.'¹⁶

Hurston collected freely from her friends. One day, one of her tale tellers in Eatonville asked: 'Why don't you go down 'round Bartow and Lakeland and 'round in dere—Polk County? Dat's where they really lies up a mess [tell tall tales] and dat where dey makes up all de songs and things like dat. Bubber Mimms, a guitarist, added: "Ah learnt all Ah know 'bout pickin' de box in Polk County". . . . With Bubber playing and Charlie singing . . . they talked and told strong stories of Ella Wall, East Coast Mary, Planchita and lesser jook lights around whom the glory of Polk County surged. Saw-mill and turpentine bosses and prison camp "cap'ns" set to music passed over the guitar strings and Charlie's mouth and I knew I had to visit Polk County now'.¹⁷

The black section of Lakeland was in the north of the town, where citrus workers and fruit-packers lived on streets with such unofficial names as Voodoo Corner, Jonk Street and Careless Avenue. Here Hurston roomed in order to collect material. Although the men would 'woof' at (flirt with) her, the people held back at first, until she pretended to be a boot-legger. Suspicious of her different background, they felt she was either a detective or a revenue officer—a boot-legger was considered socially acceptable.

She entered the tough jook joints where 'the guitars cried out "Polk County" and "Red River" and just instrumental hits with no name, that still are played by all good box pickers. The dancing was hilarious to put it mildly. Babe, Lucy, East Coast Mary and many other of the well-known women were there. The men swung them lustily. . . .'¹⁸

'Polk County! Ah! Where the water tastes like cherry wine. Where they fell great trees with axe and muscle. . . . Sweating black bodies . . . working

¹³ Hurston defines this in *Mules And Men*, p. 82, as 'a fun house where they sing, dance, gamble, love and compose "blues" songs incidently'. It is interesting to note her view of the incidental formation of blues.

¹⁴ Federal Works Agency, Works Project Administration (Federal Writers Project), *Florida: A Guide To The Southernmost State*, (American Guide Series), New York, Oxford University Press 1965 (1939), pp. 149-50

¹⁵ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, p. 35

¹⁶ Hurston, *Mules And Men*, pp. 18-19

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79, p. 82

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88

to feed the hunger of the great tooth. Polk County! . . . Black men from tree to tree among the lordly pines, a swift, slanting stroke to bleed the trees for gum. Paint, explosives, marine stores, flavours, perfumes, tone for a violin bow, and many other things which the black men who bleed the trees never heard about . . . the clang of nine-pound hammers on railway steel. The world must ride. . . . Black men scrambling up ladders into orange trees. Singing, laughing, cursing, boasting of last night's love, and looking forward to the darkness again . . . Polk County. After dark, the jooks. Songs are born out of feeling with an old beat-up piano, or a guitar for a midwife.¹⁹

The jook was in full play when we walked in. The piano was throbbing like a stringed drum and the couples slow-dragging about the floor were urging the player on to new lows. "Jook Johnnie . . . Jook it Johnnie! Throw it in the alley!" . . . Somebody had squeezed the alcohol out of several cans of Sterno and added sugar, water and boiled-off spirits of nitre and called it wine . . . the pay-night rocks on with music and gambling and laughter and dancing and fights. The big pile of cross-ties burning out in front simmers down to low ashes before sun-up; so then it is time to throw up all the likker you can't keep down and go somewhere and sleep the rest off, whether your knife has blood on it or not.²⁰

In 1935 some of Hurston's informants were recorded in Eatonville, including Gabriel Brown, who was probably the Babe Brown to whom she makes reference in *Mules And Men*, and John French, one of her more important sources of tales. A further session was held south of Lake Okechobee, at Belle Glade, centre of the area's seasonal crop picking. Some of the artists, Booker T. Sapps and his friends, were from nearby Pahokee. 'Itinerant pickers, both white and Negro, known as "travelling hands," swarm into this region at harvest time, as into other fruit- and vegetable-growing districts of the State, occupying tents, rows of tumble-down cottages, and ramshackle boarding houses. In her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Zora Neale Hurston vividly describes the scene: "Day by day now the hoards of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. . . . They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north, and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dog flivvers. All night, all day hurrying to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched-up spare inner-tubes, all hanging and dangling from ancient cars on the outside, and hopeful humanity, herded and hovering on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor.

"All night now the jooks clanged and clamoured. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love."²¹

The music documented on this album adds to our knowledge of black secular music during a decade when there were no known commercial recordings made by Florida-based artists. Perhaps as much as this it shows Hurston's ability to communicate with her own people.

Bruce Bastin © 1974

¹⁹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, pp. 94-95

²⁰ Hurston, *Mules And Men*, p. 185; *Dust Tracks*, p. 97

²¹ *Florida! A Guide To The Southernmost State*, p. 475. The Hurston quotation is taken from, Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel Of Negro Life*, Philadelphia, Penn., J. B. Lippincott, 1937, pp. 196, 197

General reference was made to: Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit From The Laughing Barrel*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1973

Flyright-Matchbox Library of Congress Series

Volume Three: SDM 257 Out In The Cold Again

Field recordings by Gabriel Brown, Rochelle French and John French, recorded at Eatonville, Florida, June 1935

Volume Four: SDM 258 Boot That Thing

Field recordings by Booker T. Sapps, Roger Matthews and Willy Flowers, recorded at Belle Glade, Florida, June 1935

All recordings supervised by Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, for the Archive of (American) Folk Song, the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Full particulars of the field recordings and a discussion of the performers and their songs can be found on the respective album sleeves

We thank Professor Daniel W. Patterson, Curriculum in Folklore, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. and the staff of the Hertfordshire County Library, Kings Langley Branch, for locating some of the more obscure references for us

Research: Bruce Bastin and John Cowley

Series Editor: John Cowley

Design: Pezare-Martin Design Associates

Presented by: Flyright Records,

21 Wickham Avenue, Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex, TN39 3EP, England

Saydisc 'Matchbox' Blues Series: Saydisc Specialized Recordings Ltd., The Barton, Inglestone Common, Badminton, Gloucestershire, GL9 1BX, England