

TWO WHITE HORSES STANDIN' IN LINE

1939 field recordings from Texas

When John A. Lomax and his son Alan set out in Summer 1933 to gather songs for their book *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) they were determined to document the important contribution of black Americans to the North American folk heritage. Starting in their Texas homeland they traversed the southern United States collecting examples of early song traditions. Arrangements had been made for field recordings resulting from this expedition to be deposited at the Library of Congress Archive of (American)¹ Folk Song and the Lomaxes' long association with the Archive began at this time.²

The music of black convicts particularly interested John A. Lomax and during his period at the Archive he arranged to visit isolated penal institutions in the majority of southern states, where he collected and recorded many of the folk songs 'preserved' by inmates.

With his 1933 tour commencing in Texas the establishments of the state's Prison System³ were naturally the first places where he obtained such songs. Lomax is known to have visited these Texas institutions during three of the years he undertook Archive field recording expeditions, first in 1933, again in 1934 (see Volume 6 in this series, SDM 265) and finally in 1939. The 1939 expedition was the least successful in documenting older folk styles but, as this album demonstrates, a considerable proportion of the recordings were in the then more recent blues tradition.

Archive field notes show that John A. accompanied by his wife, Ruby T. Lomax, set out from Port Aransas, Texas on 31 March in their 1939 Plymouth automobile, equipped with a 'Presto recording machine and playback for a. c., two sets of batteries and (a) converter.'

Travelling via Austin and Houston their next destination was the Hogg family's Varner Plantation, close to West Columbia in Brazoria County. Here they stayed for a few days. Nearby is the Clemens State Farm, which they took the opportunity of visiting and where they recorded. Their field notes describe the visit.

'On Saturday, April 15 we drove over to Clemens State Farm a few miles away to arrange for a meeting with the "boys" - Negro convicts stationed on the Farm. On Saturday the "boys" who were working near headquarters were hauling dirt, grading, cleaning ditches and otherwise improving the grounds around a new brick and steel dormitory. A group of ditch-diggers was working in time to the musical calls of the leader. We arranged to return to make records on the next day, Sunday, and returned to West Columbia to rent batteries for power, the dormitory being wired for d. c.

'When we arrived at the Farm the next day the "boys" were ready for us. Mechanics from the white convicts, who had quarters on the second floor, helped adjust the machinery. The barber and the dentist furnished counter attractions but our "show" gave the "boys" greater diversion. Gradually after suggestions from Mr Lomax as to what kind of music he wished to record, musicians and singers volunteered or were pushed forward by their contemporaries. Some of the "boys", Ace Johnson and Smith Cason (sic) for example, already had experience before the microphone since they were sometimes used on the programme called "Behind The Walls" broadcast from the Huntsville, Texas Penitentiary on Wednesday nights. After two hours we stopped for lunch, we being served with the white guards, and after lunch we worked an hour or so until the time came for base-ball practice and preaching.'

Having completed their recordings at Clemens, John A. and his wife returned to Houston whence they travelled to Sugarland continuing their search for singers and songs at the nearby Central State Farm. 'The Captain had a good dinner served us and assisted Mr Lomax in trying to locate singers. In previous years Central Farm had "entertained" such singers as Clear Rock and Iron Head,⁴ who had made recordings. But this trip was fruitless. The old crowd had scattered, the new "boys" sang fewer of the old songs and in performance imitated radio artists. We did not set up the machine. We found about the same situation at the Darrington Farm some thirty miles away - few singers and these not interested in old songs or the old manner of singing.

'Our next stop was at Camp Four of the Ramsey State Farm (near Otey) where most of the habituals and incorrigibles stay. With the help of the Captain and some of his guards we located some singers, who were admitted one by one or by small groups into a small office where the recording machine was set up . . . Just outside this office we could look down on the dormitory room, where Negro convicts were playing cards, reading, talking, singing blues, listening to an exhorter, sleeping. One "boy" was standing on a barrel as a punishment for some violation of rules. We saw the "boys" go into supper, in a line, both hands on the shoulders of the man in front of him . . . Supper with the white guards closed our day at Ramsey.'

FOOTNOTES

1. From its inception in 1928 until 1956 the Archive was, by name, exclusively American. Since then it has been known as the Archive of Folk Song.
2. For a summary of the Lomaxes 1933 folk song collecting philosophy see their 'Introduction' to: John A Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads And Folk Songs*, New York, Macmillan, 1934, pp. xxv-xxxix. Their 1933 collecting experiences are described in: (a) Alan Lomax, "'Sinful" Songs Of The Southern Negro', *Southwest Review*, No. 2, Dallas, Winter 1934 (sic) (1933), pp. 105-131 (b) John A. Lomax, *Adventures Of A Ballad Hunter*, New York, Macmillan, 1947, pp.106-133. Both John A. and Alan Lomax have championed black folk song in their books and other writings.
3. In 1957 the Texas Prison System was renamed the Texas Department of Correction.
4. Later in the expedition Moses 'Clear Rock' Platt was traced to Taylor, Texas and made fresh recordings. James 'Iron Head' Baker for whom John A. Lomax once helped obtain parole was also found again, this time incarcerated at the Ramsey State Farm. He too was recorded anew.

² Almost a month later they reached Huntsville where 'J. A. L. visited (the) State Penitentiary (the 'Walls') to arrange for recordings' and had a 'conference with (the) director of (the) broadcast programme "Thirty Minutes Behind The Walls"'. Despite several visits to the penitentiary very little recording was accomplished. A few selections however were recorded at the Goree State Farm for women - situated a short distance from Huntsville. This concluded their 1939 Texas prison recordings. The expedition however continued through East Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and finally South Carolina.

The most surprising fact established by these field notes is that during the late 1930s a radio series featuring prison talent - *Thirty Minutes Behind The Walls* - was broadcast from Huntsville. Three of the performers on this record are noted as having broadcast on the programme, Hattie Ellis from the Goree Farm, plus the aforementioned Ace Johnson and Smith Cason (Casey) from Clemens. Nothing more is known of the programmes although black blues talents were obviously a feature and it is likely that white prisoners (probably oldtime performers) also participated.

Unfortunately, many of the recordings made during this field expedition start and finish part way through performances - possibly because the Lomaxes were economising on blank recording discs - the field notes however have complete although sometimes inaccurate transcriptions of the majority of the songs.

The discs were allocated temporary numbers during the expedition and only afterwards given Archive identification numbers. It is therefore possible that the temporary numbers indicate the order of recording. Accordingly each artist and his songs are discussed in this progression.

First in this order is Smith Casey (the name on his death certificate) who was undoubtedly the most important blues discovery of this 1939 Texas recording trip. Although the field notes have little biographical information, it has fortunately been possible to piece together some details of his life. Casey was the son of William Smith and Phyllis Thomas and was born on 16 August 1895, probably at Riverside, Walker County, Texas. He had seven sisters, one of whom was his elder and also has a natural daughter who will receive royalties from this record. It is not known why or when he entered prison but he was conditionally paroled on 18 July 1945. His 1950 Medical History Blank shows that he was then a farmer with an address in Huntsville and that his religion was Baptist. In September 1949 he was taken ill with a 'cold' but by February 1950 his physical condition had deteriorated and on 7 March he was admitted to the East Texas Sanatorium, Tyler where tuberculosis was diagnosed. He died there on 11 September of the same year.

A single Smith Casey comment is documented in the field notes '(I) learned my songs on de streets in Jackson and San Jacinto counties'⁵ and this is the only contemporary clue we have to his musical background. Bob Groom, who has discussed Casey's songs, observes that 'his repertoire reflects a thorough grounding in the type of Negro folk ballads, blues and spirituals popular when (Texas) singers like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Mance Lipscomb were growing up', a fact substantiated by the closeness of their birthdates.⁶ Casey's music is therefore especially important, for Texas blues guitarists of his generation are not well represented by commercial recordings.

The first Smith Casey recording (using the temporary disc progression) is Jack O' Diamonds (9 A 1). The field notes show that this is incomplete in that the initial verse and verses succeeding the final phrase of the record are missing. The text is:

Jack o' Diamonds, Jack o' Diamonds is a hard card to play,
You can play it in the summer, play it in the fall,
But Jack o' Diamonds wuz the pore man's friend.

I plays the deuce 'gainst the tree (sic),
'Cause the deuce has been winnin' all day.

My pardner, Low, plays the Jack 'gainst the Fo',
He'll win that bet in the dough.

I begged my pardner, Low, don't gamble no mo',
'Cause he would win that bet right in the dough,

Yes, mother, I know you told me so,
Don't play dice an' cards any mo'.

I received a letter which you reckon it said,
That my pardner, was (sic) Low, was dead.

I thought I heard the big bell tone,
I know that my pardner Low was dead an' gone.

There are minor differences between this and the words used in the recording.

Casey's is a personalized version of a gambling song, very well known in Texas, in which the singer advises on betting for or against cards or dice, especially the Jack of Diamonds. In particular this song is said to refer to the playing of the Spanish and Spanish-American card game of chance, Monte.⁷ As with Casey's performance, slide-guitar playing is the usual accompaniment to the piece.

Black Texans have made a number of recordings of Jack O' Diamonds the first and most familiar being Jack O' Diamond Blues by Blind Lemon Jefferson (Paramount 12373, issued in 1926.) The Lomaxes recorded the song for the Archive on five known occasions, all of them in Texas, including two versions by Pete Harris (see SDM 265) and the Smith Casey rendition here.⁸ Jack O' Diamonds has also been recorded by singers from other states.

5. This quotation comes from the note to Jack O' Diamonds.

6. Casey's songs are described in: Bob Groom, 'Smith Casey', Blues World, No. 34, Knutsford, September, 1970, pp. 4-6. Lemon Jefferson was born in 1897, Mance Lipscomb in 1895.

7. Several authoritative books on the rules of card games have been consulted but none show why the Jack of Diamonds should be a key card when playing Monte - see in particular editions of: John Scarne, Scarne On Cards - and there remains the possibility that card playing versions of the song are not about Monte at all.

8. Other recordings by Texans: (a) unknown, Jack A Diamonds (AFS 716831 (cylinder 7/3)), 1933. This was recorded by the Lomaxes and there is a field note text taken down from the singing of convicts at the Darrington State Farm (1933-34) which may be from the same performance. (b) James 'Iron Head' Baker, Jack O' Diamonds (AFS 202 B 2), 1934 (c) Lightnin' Hopkins, Jack O' Diamonds, (52), 1960 (d) Mance Lipscomb, Jack O' Diamonds Is A Hard Card To Play, Arhoolie (Lp) 1001; 1960 (e) Thomas Shaw, Jack Of Diamonds, Advent (Lp) 2804, c. 1970-71. Sippie Wallace's 1926 recording, Jack O' Diamond Blues (Okeh 8238), has very different lyrics and melody.

3 As early as 1912 Texas folklorist Will Thomas published a dice playing text⁹ (re-printed by Dorothy Scarborough (with musical notation) in 1923 and 1926)¹⁰ and in 1915 E. C. Perrow published another dice playing variant, with the term 'Jack o' Diamonds' replaced by 'Diamond Joe'. This had been collected, in 1909, from Mississippi blacks.¹¹ In 1926, Chicago Music (Paramount Records' music publishing house) deposited the unpublished words and melody of Lemon Jefferson's version at the Library of Congress Copyright Office and later (c. 1927) printed the lyrics with arrangement for piano.¹² The Lomaxes published another musically notated version (again based on the Jefferson recording) in *Our Singing Country* (1941), their second collection of American ballads and folk songs.¹³ More recently the text of Mance Lipscomb's 1960 recording, together with a general discussion of the *Jack O' Diamonds* theme, has been printed by Mack McCormick. All these recordings and texts confirm McCormick's statements that 'the song is not strictly associated with any particular artist' and that 'many different versions are in circulation.'¹⁴

It should be noted that although the discography *Blues & Gospel Records 1902-1942* (1969) shows AFS 3551 A 2 *Ole Rattler* (9 A 2) to be a Smith Casey performance, it is in fact by Tommy Woods and a group of black convicts.¹⁵

Casey's following song *Mournful Blues* (9 B 1) is listed in the field notes as *Mournful Trouble Blues* but was retitled in the Archive's *Checklist*¹⁶. Again the recording is incomplete in that the song starts part way through a verse and finishes at the beginning of another. Unfortunately the notes do not have the full lyrics; just three lines and a comment - 'words very difficult to understand.' Casey plays slide-guitar and extensively uses the antiphonal (call and response) technique between the guitar and voice, both of which suggest that this is a religious performance. The five verses that are on the record add weight to this suggestion for they seem to be part of a sung-prayer or some other song of worship.

(New) *Shorty George* (11 A 1) is the field note title for the next Casey recording. This original name is an apt description for as Bruce Jackson observes in *Wake Up Dead Man* (his recent book of black Texas prison songs) the song has some similarities with other printed and recorded versions 'but (is) different enough to be considered not the same'.¹⁷ Jackson prints four variants in his book¹⁸ and other texts have been published by the Lomaxes, who also recorded seven versions for the Archive.¹⁹ Three (possibly five) of these were made by convicts at the Central State Farm, Sugarland, where 'Shorty George' is said to have originated as a convict nickname for the train which passed the farm daily at sundown and, on Sundays, regularly transported women visitors to and from the prison. The two other versions are by Leadbelly (AFS 149 B, 150 A) and the Smith Casey one under discussion. Leadbelly served time at 'Sugarland' and almost certainly learned the song whilst he was there; he also recorded it commercially.

There are two 1923 'race' recordings entitled *Shorty George Blues*, one by the great Texas woman singer Sippie Wallace (Okeh 8106) and the other (Gennett 5345) by woman singer Tiny Franklin. The latter has one of Sippie's brothers, George W. Thomas, playing the piano accompaniment. Textually these records differ considerably from the versions collected from Texas prisoners. Sippie has twice recorded her song since the Second World War (*Shorty George*, Mercury 2005 and *Shorty George Blues*, Storyville (LP) SLP 198.) Two 1960 recordings of *Shorty George* by Texas blues pianist Edwin 'Buster' Pickens, have unfortunately never been issued and his lyrics remain unpublished.

Roger Gill joins Smith Casey in the singing of *West Texas Blues* (Talkin' 'bout) *West Texas* (11 A 2) in the field notes.) The recording cuts off part way through the final verse but fortunately this is reproduced in the notes:

Yes unsaddle my grey horse, (baby,) hitch up my pink an' roan,
 Unsaddle dat grey horse (?) ... hitch up dat pink an' roan,
 Hear dat black gal done quit me, got to be some ridin' done.

There are several commercial blues recordings with the West Texas theme all of which probably refer to a black population shift, from the east to the west of Texas, that occurred earlier this century.

Roger Gill was a native of Bryan, Texas and served four terms in prison. He was finally discharged on 16 February 1959.

9. W. H. Thomas, *Some Current Folk Songs Of The Negro And Their Economic Interpretation*, Texas Folklore Society, 1912, p. 11. Reprinted in: J. Frank Dobie (ed.), *Rainbow In The Morning*, Publications of the Texas Folklore Society, No. 5, Texas Folklore Society, 1926, p. 201.
10. Dorothy Scarborough, 'The "Blues" As Folk Songs' in: J. Frank Dobie (ed.), *Coffee In The Gourd*, Publications Of The Texas Folklore Society, No. 2, Texas Folklore Society, 1923, pp. 64-65. Reprinted in: Dorothy Scarborough, *On The Trail of Negro Folk Songs*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1925, pp. 279-280.
11. E. C. Perrow, 'Songs And Rhymes From The South, 6, Songs Connected With Drinking And Gambling', *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 28, No. 108, April-June, 1915, p. 133.
12. Unpublished copyright registration: E 645331, 16 August 1926. The text and piano arrangement were printed in: *The Paramount Book Of Blues*, Port Washington, New York Recording Laboratories, c. 1927, p. 7.
13. John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country*, New York, Macmillan, 1941, pp. 303-305.
14. Mack McCormick, 'Mance Lipscomb, Texas Sharecropper And Songster', notes to the long playing record of the same title, Arhoolie 1001, Berkeley, 1960, p. 3. (Lipscomb's text is on p. 6). There are black Texas prisoners' recollections of a card playing convict and a sadistic prison captain at Darrington State Farm who were both known as Jack o' Diamonds in: Bruce Jackson (ed.) *Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Worksongs From Texas Prisons*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1972, pp. 12-13.
15. John Godrich and Robert M. W. Dixon, *Blues and Gospel Records 1902-1942*, London, Storyville Publications & Co., 1969, p. 145.
16. *Checklist of Recorded Songs In The English Language In The Archive Of American Folk Song To July 1940*, Washington, D. C., Library of Congress, 1942.
17. Jackson, op. cit., p. 119.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-123.
19. Published Lomax texts not mentioned by Jackson: (a) Alan Lomax, op. cit., pp. 124-125. (b) John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Folk Song USA*, New York, Duell Sloan & Pearce, 1947, pp. 70-71. It should be noted that Jackson makes a consistent error in his book by printing the publication date of: Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads And Folk Songs*, as 1936 instead of 1934. He also incorrectly states Smith Casey's *Shorty George* as being on AFS album L8, it is on L4. Lomax recordings of *Shorty George* not listed by Jackson: (a) unknown 'trusty', (AFS 716836 (cylinder 4/2)), c. 5 July 1933 (b) unknown, (AFS 718821 (cylinder 18/3)), 1933 (c) unknown, (AFS 716825 (cylinder 22/4)), 1933.

4 Santa Fe Blues (11 B 1) by Smith Casey is a superlative performance and displays his considerable vocal and guitar playing talents to their full. Several differing blues have been recorded with the 'Santa Fe' railroad as their theme and a number use a traditional stanza which, although it was not recorded, the field notes show Casey sang:

Oakdale on the Mountain, Craven on the Santa Fe,
Oakdale on the Mountain, Craven on the Santa Fe,
I know good an' well this ain't no place for me.

These lines are given as his first verse and are obviously those from which the song title was taken.

I Wouldn't Mind Dying If Dying Was All (12 A 1) is one of two Southern sacred songs which Smith Casey recorded, the other When I Git Home (12 A 2) he sings in duet with Roger Gill.

Casey plays fine slide-guitar accompaniment to the former song and the field notes show additional verse fragments:

Well Lord, let me be your child,
Ezekiel said he saw a wheel in de middle o' de wheel,
Wouldn't mind dyin' got to stand de test.

In the booklet which accompanies a recent Carter Family album (JEMF (Lp) 101), Norm Cohen briefly discusses the Carters' oldtime gospel version of I Wouldn't Mind Dying and prints a bibliography-discography of the song.²⁰ Omitting two 'possibly related' recordings it is interesting to note that the majority of versions listed are by blacks; including the first seven (all released between 1926 and 1930.) Four of these are by black 'Sanctified' performers associated with Texas and this, together with Smith Casey's recording, indicates that the song was popular in the state. The Carters' 1932 recording (Victor 23807) is the first oldtime version noted.

When I Git Home is a familiar religious theme and, although documentation is sparse, the song may well have had a wide distribution throughout the South. Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson printed a text in their book Negro Workaday Songs (1926)²¹ and in 1930, RCA Victor recorded this title from a gospel quartet, the Bessemer Melody Boys (Victor 23252). Nine years later another rendition was made by Brother George (Blind Boy Fuller) And His Sanctified Singers (Talking With Jesus, Okeh 05893.)

Just two and a half verses of Grey Horse Blues (12 B 2) were recorded and unfortunately the field notes have no transcription of the song. Casey's guitar playing is in the style of Blind Lemon Jefferson and indeed Jefferson recorded a Black Horse Blues (Paramount 12367) in 1926 but his lyrics are only distantly connected. The theme has been popular with Mississippi blacks who made a number of related recordings during the 1920s and '30s.

Funeral Song is the field note title for Smith Casey's Two White Horses Standin' In Line (13 A 1). This is one of two exceptional interpretations of Blind Lemon Jefferson's See That My Grave Is Kept Clean that the Lomaxes recorded for the Archive - the other is Blind Lemon's Song by Pete Harris (see SDM 265). The form of this influential song seems to have been established by Jefferson's two recordings (Paramount 12585, made in 1927, and Paramount 12608, made in 1928.) Casey's version is closely modelled on Lemon's and so are most other renderings. In a recent letter (1975) Dan Patterson, Folklore Professor at the University of North Carolina, shows that Jefferson's original is an amalgamation of several earlier songs, amongst them Old Blue (or Old Veen), Stormalong (a nineteenth century sea shanty) and a number of spirituals.²² This usefully adds to the unsupported suggestions of Mack McCormick (1960) and Harry Oster (1969) that the song is either 'hymn based' or 'originally a Negro spiritual'.²⁴

See That My Grave Is Kept Clean has sometimes been confused with See That My Grave Is Kept Green an oldtime song, recorded by (amongst others) the Carter Family. They are not the same. The Carters however did record a song based on the Lemon Jefferson original - Sad and Lonesome Day (ARC 7-04-53, made in 1935.) Later recordings of this variant include Lonesome Day by Woodie Guthrie (Stinson (Lp) SLP 44) and Red Allen's bluegrass version (County (Lp) 749) recorded in the 1960s.

Smith Casey's East Texas Rag (13 A 2) is a spirited guitar piece which shows off his considerable ability on the instrument.

Hesitation Blues (14 A 1) is Casey's rendering of one of the early blues compositions, although his lyrics differ considerably from other recorded versions and W. C. Handy's original sheet music publication The Hesitating Blues (Memphis, Pace & Handy Music Co., June 1915.) Handy obtained the song from 'a wandering musician who said he had it from a hymn'.²⁵ Three months later than Handy, Billy Smythe independently published a melody Hesitation Blues (Louisville, Billy Smythe Music Co. Inc., September 1915) described as a 'one-step'. Set at a faster tempo this is based on the same tune. There are eight stanzas of the song (collected between 1915 and 1919) in Newman Ivey White's book American Negro Folk Songs (1926) but only two of them correspond with Handy's. Within the broad spectrum of American 'folk' music there are both instrumental and vocal recordings of the Hesitating theme.²⁷ Sung versions often vary from Handy's words and this, together with White's evidence, indicates that the lyrics were not fixed by sheet music publication.

20. Norm Cohen, The Carter Family On Border Radio, notes to the long playing record of the same title, JEMF 101, Los Angeles, 1972, pp. 18-19.

21. Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, Negro Workaday Songs, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1926, pp. 203-204.

22. Letter to the author, 16 January 1975.

23. McCormick, op. cit., p. 4.

24. Harry Oster, Living Country Blues, Detroit, Folklore Associates, 1969, p. 183.

25. W. C. Handy and Abbe Niles, Blues An Anthology, New York, Collier Books, 1972 (1949), p. 210.

26. Newman Ivey White, American Negro Folk Songs, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1926, pp. 325-326, p. 339, p. 391, p. 398.

27. A variety of recorded examples include: (a) Victor Military Band, Hesitation Blues, Victor 18163, 1916 (b) Jim Europe's 369th Infantry ('Hell Fighters') Band, Hesitating Blues, Pathe 22086, 1919 (c) Burnett and Rutherford, Curley-Headed Woman, Columbia 15240-D, 1927 (d) Buddy Boy Hawkins, Voice Throwing Blues, Paramount 12802, 1929 (e) Jim Jackson, Hesitation Blues Vocalion 1447, 1930 (f) Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, If The River Was Whisky, Columbia 15545-D, 1930, (g) Leadbelly, Hesitation Blues, (AFS 141 A), 1935 (h) Milton Brown and his Brownies, Hesitation Blues, Decca 5266, 1936 (i) Jelly Roll Morton, If I Was Whisky And You Was A Duck, (AFS 1652-B) 1938.

5 Nothing is known of Ace Johnson's background but his recordings show that he was familiar with traditional themes. His Rabbit In De Garden (10 A 1) was originally titled The Rabbit in the field notes. Texts of this song are represented in two of the important early collections of black folk songs - Dorothy Scarborough prints versions from Mississippi and an unidentified source²⁸ and Newman Ivey White one from Durham, North Carolina (collected in 1919).²⁹ In addition E. C. Perrow reprints a further text from Mississippi blacks (obtained in 1909).³⁰ A group of 'older' children at Brandon, Mississippi recorded another version for the Archive in 1937 (AFS 884 B 4). All this suggests that the Rabbit In The Garden theme was widespread in the South and, although no positive evidence is to hand, it is likely that the song was originated by children with, perhaps, the Brer Rabbit folk tales as its source.

Mack McCormick attributes to children the origin of the other Ace Johnson song included here - Mama Don't 'Low No Swingin' Out In Here (10 B 1) - and discusses its extensive distribution 'across all levels of American culture', of which there are numerous recorded examples.³¹ Johnson's performance unfortunately cuts off part way through the recording but there are further lines in the field notes:

Oh, Mama don't 'low no truckin' round in here, etc.
Mama don't 'low no French harp playin' etc.
Mama don't 'low no guitar playin' etc.

Another version of this theme was recorded later in the field trip by a group of women convicts (including Hattis Ellis) at the Goree State Farm, Texas (Cap'n Don't 'Low No Truckin' Round In Here (58 B 1) - AFS 2639 B 1).

Ace Johnson recorded two other performances not on this album, Clemens Rag (13 B 2) - an instrumental guitar duet with L. W. Gooden - and Influenza (13 B 3). The lyrics of the latter (transcribed in the field notes) are word for word the same as Elder Curry's Memphis Flu (Okeh 8857). Apparently Johnson 'learned it (Influenza) off a holiness boy in Amarillo' so Curry's record seems not to have been the direct source.

There is some sparse biographical information on Jesse Lockett who recorded Worry Blues (10 B 3). He was born on 23 September 1912 in Lovelady, Texas. His crime and the date of his entry into prison are not known but he was discharged on 14th September 1939, four months after his recording had been made.

Although not documented in the Archive's Checklist, Worry Blues has guitar accompaniment, possibly by Lockett himself. The song has a familiar theme but the recording is truncated; the lyrics however are completed in the notes:

Oh it's blues and trouble seem to be my best friend,
Even when my blues leave me then my trouble begin.

If anyone aska you who composed this song,
Tell him you don't know who wrote it but he's done come an' gone.

After World War II, recordings credited to one Jesse Lockett (a vocalist) were issued on the Gulf and Gold Star, Texas based record labels³² and it may be he is the same performer as featured here. Unfortunately it has not been possible to make aural comparison between recordings to verify this suggestion.

There is a field note reference to Wallace Chains ('Big Stavin' Chain') and Sylvester Jones ('Little Stavin' Chain' or 'Texas Stavin' Chain') - 'two "boys" claimed the nickname of the famous "Stavin' Chain"; they compromised by accepting the amended names "Big Stavin' Chain" and "Little Stavin' Chain".'

According to his prison file Wallace Chains was born in New York City in 1886 and served three terms as a Texas convict. His first prison number (54878) is in a series known to have been allocated in the 1920s. Chains was finally discharged in July 1954 at which time his wife, Bessie, was living in Houston. This, together with his prison record, indicates that he had resided in Texas for, at least, the previous twenty-five years.

Sylvester Jones was born on 15 April 1896 and like Roger Gill was a native of Bryan, Texas. Jones served two terms as a convict and died in prison hospital (June 1962).

The field notes show that the Chains-Jones recording Smokey Mountain Blues (18 A 1) is without the first and last verses of the performance:

(verse 1) These Smokey Mountains, way out in de West,
I say these Smokey Mountains they are way out in de West,
I was standin' here wonderin' who my good girl loves best.

(verse 8) I'm goin' to Newport to co's' Aunt Caroline Dyer,
I'm goin' to Newport to co's' Aunt Caroline Dyer,
She's a fortune-teller an' aint never telled a lie.

The song is based on traditional stanzas.

28. Scarborough, On The Trail Of Negro Folk Songs, pp. 174-175.

29. White, op. cit., p. 234.

30. Perrow, 'Songs And Rhymes From The South, 2, Songs In Which Animals Figure', Journal Of American Folklore, Vol. 27, No. 99, January-March, 1913, p. 132.

31. McCormick, op. cit., p. 4.

32. JESSE LOCKETT

v, with brass, p, b, d
Black As A Berry
Boogie Woogie Mama

Houston, c. 1947
Gulf 3000
Gulf 3000

JESSE LOCKETT & WILL ROWLAND (BAND)

v, with tp, a. s., p, b, d
Cold Blooded Woman
Run Rabbit Run
Reefer Blues
Don't Loose Your Mind

Houston, c. 1949
Gold Star 650
Gold Star 650
Gold Star 657
Gold Star 657

Ella Speed (18 A 2) has only four verses but Wallace Chains later sent a (hand-written) ten stanza version to 'Mr & Mrs John A. Lomax'. The Lomax family are responsible for much early documentation of this black Texas ballad (Laws, 16)³³ They obtained recordings for the Archive by Leadbelly (AFS 54 A. B; AFS 120 B; AFS 125 B), Tricky Sam (AFS 215 B 2), Finious 'Flatfoot' Rockmore (AFS 3990 A 1) and the Chains- Jones one on this record. John A. Lomax also took down and preserved texts from 'a Negro girl at Prairie View Normal' and Tricky Sam, plus a verse from Moses 'Clear Rock' Platt. Tricky Sam's text differs considerably from his recording (see SDM 265).³⁴ All of these variants are by performers who lived in Texas and in the 1960s Ella Speed was also recorded by Texans, Mance Lipscomb (Arhoolie (Lp) 1001), Jewel Long and Lightnin' Hopkins. The Lomaxes published three versions taken from their collection³⁵ and other published texts also originated in Texas.³⁶ According to Leadbelly the events described in Ella Speed took place in Dallas not long before he moved there (in the early years of the century) and the ballad was originally made up by a group of local songsters, including himself.

My Pore Mother Keeps On Praying For Me (19 A 2) is a fine blues with original lyrics.

The Archive's Checklist, field notes and handwritten notes on the record jackets do not give clear information as to the way in which Chains and Jones participated in their three recordings. The Checklist shows both performers as singing on each of them which is not so. It seems likely however that in all instances Chains is the singer and Jones the guitarist although aural evidence is not entirely conclusive.

Richard L. Lewis, the singer of the traditional Long Freight Train Blues (61 A) was born in Waco, Texas on 6 June 1905. He served three prison terms and was finally discharged in August 1943. His guitarist, Wilbert Gilliam, was a one-time convict and was discharged in January 1941. Gilliam was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on 1 March 1912.

Smith Casey excepted, Hattie Ellis is the only other performer on this record about whom anything of substance is known, for she is the one Texas prison inmate who received biographical attention in the field notes. 'Hattie Ellis is a blues singer who is very popular on the radio programme from the Texas State Penitentiary. She claims to have composed Desert Blues. The Captain (Heath) told us that in one week Hattie received 3,000 "fan" letters. She is in for thirty years for killing a man. Another Dallas, Texas Negro girl who "come visitin' in Arkansas and got took up for somethin' I didn't do" told us that Hattie wouldn't have got such a long time if she hadn't sassed the judge when he brought her boot-legging activities into the murder case. Hattie's singing is fast becoming throaty as she strives to imitate the professional "blues" singers.

'Later - Fall 1940: Officials of the Old Fiddlers Contest, held annually at Athens, Texas, announced that Hattie Ellis would not keep her engagement to sing with a group of musicians from the State Penitentiary because she had been recently paroled and was back home in Dallas.' Her prison record shows she was discharged in March 1956. She was born on 3 February 1913 at Rockdale, Texas. Of the two recordings under her name in the Checklist, Desert Blues (63 A 1) is the only original composition as I Ain't Got Nobody (63 B 1) is a version of the familiar popular song. On both she is accompanied by a white guitarist from 'The Walls' - 'Cowboy' Jack Ramsey.

Although John A. and Ruby T. Lomax wrote down details of Hattie's life they were not especially impressed with her vocals. ~~for~~ in addition to their comment that her singing was 'fast becoming throaty' the field notes quote from a letter written (from Arkansas) by Ruby T. in May 1939. 'Two or three "blues" that we recorded from Negro girls at Cummins Prison Farm are better than those of the far famed Hattie of the Texas "Thirty Minutes Behind The Walls" programme.' Notwithstanding, Desert Blues is a fine performance and composition.

It was well that the Lomaxes began collecting black Texas folk songs in 1933 for record companies made no location 'country blues' recordings in that year and (pianists excepted) very few of the state's blues performers were commercially recorded between 1934 and 1942. This and the Lomax family's ability to record interesting, sometimes exceptional, folk performances makes their 1930s black Texas folk music recordings unique.

John H. Cowley (c) 1976.

33. G. Malcolm Laws Jnr., Native American Balladry, Philadelphia, American Folklore Society, 1950.
34. Leadbelly also recorded Ella Speed commercially (Capitol (Lp) H369).
35. (a) Alan Lomax, op. cit., p. 126 (b) Lomax and Lomax, American Ballads And Folk Songs, pp. 117-118 (c) John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, Negro Folk Songs As Sung By Leadbelly, New York, Macmillan, 1936, pp. 187-192.
36. One early variant, Po' Li'l Ella, is printed by Scarborough in: Dobie (ed.), Coffee In The Gourd, p. 63 and reprinted (with musical notation) in: Scarborough, On The Trail Of Negro Folk Song, p. 278. Another variant, Alice B, is in: Carl Sandburg, The American Songbag, New York, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1927, pp. 28-29. The names Alice B and Ella Speed are phonetically similar.

Recordings supervised by John Avery Lomax and Ruby Terril Lomax for the Archive of (American) Folk Song, the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Discographical details are on the album sleeve.

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