



Matchbox Bluesmaster Series - set 1



MSESET1
6 CD set

COUNTRY BLUES
and
RAGTIME BLUES GUITAR 1926-30

Buddy Boy Hawkins
Bo Weavil Jackson
Peg Leg Howell
Texas Alexander
and others

Series Editor: Johnny Parth
Notes: Paul Oliver
Produced by: Gef Lucena
Remastering from 78s: Hans Klement, Austrophon Studios, Vienna
Digitising from vinyl: Norman White

Original recordings from the collections of
Werner Benecke, Joe Bussard, Johnny Parth, Guido van Rijn,
Bernd Kuefferle,

With thanks to Mark Jones of Bristol Folk Publications for the loan of
vinyl LP copies of the original re-issue series

Sleeve Design: Bob Doling/Genny Lucena

Discographical details from Blues and Gospel Records 1902-1942
by John Godrich and Robert Dixon

**Considering the extreme rarity of the original 78s, condition is generally
better than might be expected, but it must be borne in mind that only
one or two copies are known to exist of some titles.**

**MATCHBOX BLUESMASTER SERIES
IS A DIVISION OF SAYDISC RECORDS
The Barton, Inglestone Common
Badminton, S Glos, GL9 1BX, England
www.saydisc.com**

Matchbox Bluesmaster Series

The 42 albums that make up the iconic Matchbox Bluesmaster Series was released by Saydisc Records between Nov 1982 and June 1988. Most of the albums were subtitled “Complete Recordings in Chronological Order” with a few under the subtitle “The Remaining Titles” or “New to LP”. The originating 78 rpm records (many of them extremely rare) were provided by several collectors under the editorship of well known Austrian collector, Johnny Parth and were re-mastered by Hans Klement of Austrophon Studios in Vienna. Johnny Parth had already created his extensive Roots Records label which Saydisc distributed in the UK and the Matchbox Bluesmaster Series was a carefully sculpted edition of black blues roots music giving a broad spectrum of the genre.

The series documented the early days of blues, hokum and gospel music from 1926 to 1934 (1950 for two tracks) and gives an insight into the way that black music was first released on record. From a commercial standpoint, records companies such as OKEH sent out talent scouts to find black singers, many of them “singing for nickels” on street corners. The market that these RACE record companies were after was the black community and they sometimes gave these newly found performers epithets such as “Peg Leg ...”, “Blind ...”, “Bo Weavil...”, “Buddy Boy...”, “Barbecue...” or “Texas...” to give them more appeal. The music of these singers formed the backbone of later urban blues, rhythm-and-blues and, of course, rock-‘n’-roll. The songs are sometimes raw and primitive in character, but some outstanding playing and singing shines through many of the performances.

Putting this music into perspective are the very valuable notes by **Paul Oliver** who was a world authority on early jazz and blues and travelled in the US extensively to try and trace any remaining details of these sometimes obscure people. Along with the work of other field collectors and researchers, we gain a rare insight into the world of black musicians of the day by reading his notes alongside listening to the music they performed.

Paul Oliver not only wrote 10 books on the history of blues and gospel music, but was also a Professor of Architecture on which subject he wrote five seminal books. He was born in May 1927 and died in August 2017. Through his blues books and writings he opened many windows into a little researched area which is of such importance to the history of black music in America. The final 4 CDs in the series are entitled “Songsters and Saints” and were put together by Paul Oliver to illustrate his book of the same name.

The present Matchbox Bluesmaster Series has been transcribed from the 1980’s vinyl pressings by Norman White using high-end transcription techniques. The original master tapes for the vinyl releases vanished long ago. See page 31 for details of the rest of the series.

Saydisc has in its vaults many more pre-Bluesmaster blues albums which may be issued on CD in due course.

GEF LUCENA, Series Producer

MATCHBOX BLUESMASTER SERIES

SET 1: DISC 1: Original vinyl release date: Nov. 1982 as

MSE201 COUNTRY BLUES – THE FIRST GENERATION 1927

Subtitled: "Complete Recordings"

34'58"

**Papa Harvey Hull, vcl; Long Cleve Reed, vcl/humming/talking/gtr;
Wilson, gtr .**

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|-------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Gang Of Brown Skin Women (Hull) | 12689 | Chicago, c. April 8, 1927 |
| 2 | France Blues (Hull) | 12690 | – |
| 3 | Two Little Tommies Blues (Hull) | 12691 | – |
| 4 | Don't You Leave Me Here (Trad.) | 12692 | – |

Long Cleve Reed and The Down-Home Boys:

Presumably similar.

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| 5 | Mama You Don't Know How (Reed) | BP 8030 | Chicago, c. May, 1927 |
| 6 | Original Stack O'Lee Blues (Trad.) | BP 8030 | – |

Richard ("Rabbit") Brown, vcl acc. by own gtr.

- | | | | |
|----|--|---------|---------------------------|
| 7 | James Alley Blues (R. Brown) | 38000-1 | New Orleans, Mar 11, 1927 |
| 8 | Never Let The Same Bee
Sting You Twice (R. Brown) | 38002-1 | – |
| 9 | I'm Not Jealous (R. Brown) | 38003-1 | – |
| 10 | Mystery Of The Dunbar's
Child (R. Brown) | 38004-1 | – |
| 11 | Sinking Of The Titanic (R. Brown) | 38005-1 | – |

SET 1: DISC 2: Original vinyl release date: Jan 1983 as
MSE 202 WALTER “BUDDY BOY” HAWKINS: 1927 – 29
Subtitled: “Complete Recordings in Chronological Order” **34’11”**

**Walter “Buddy Boy” Hawkins, vcl acc. by own gtr: with unknown
comments added on track 11**

1	Shaggy Dog Blues	4415	Chicago, c. April, 1927
2	Number Three Blues	4416-2	–
3	Jailhouse Fire Blues	4419-2	–
4	Snatch It Back Blues	4420-2	–
5	Workin’ On The Railroad	20027-2	Chicago, c.Sept, 1927
6	Yellow Woman Blues	20028-2	–
7	Raggin’ The Blue	20029-3	–
8	Awful Fix Blues	20034-1	–
9	A Rag Blues	15212	Richmond, Ind., Jun 14, 1929
10	How Come Mama Blues	15213	–
11	Snatch It and Grab It	15218	–
12	Voice Throwin’ Blues	15219	–

Words and music by Walter Hawkins (all titles)

SET 1: DISC 3: Original vinyl release date: Jan 1983 as
MSE 203 BO WEAVIL JACKSON (SAM BUTLER): 1926
Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

38'26"

**Bo Weavil Jackson (Sam Butler), vcl acc. by own gtr.
prob. Chicago, c. Sept, 1926**

- | | | |
|----|---|------------------|
| 1 | Devil and My Brown Blues | Vo 1055 |
| 2 | Poor Boy Blues | Vo 1057 |
| 3 | Jefferson County Blues | Vo 1057 |
| 4 | Jefferson County Blues | (alt. take) test |
| 5 | You Can't Keep No Brown | Vo 1055 |
| 6 | Christians Fight On, Your Time Ain't Long | Vo 1056 |
| 7 | Heaven is My View | Vo 1056 |
| 8 | Pistol Blues | 2675-3 |
| 9 | Some Scream High Yellow | 2677-2 |
| 10 | You Can't Keep No Brown | 2678-2 |
| 11 | When the Saints Come Marching Home | 2680-1 |
| 12 | I'm On My Way to the Kingdom Land | 2681-2 |
| 13 | Why Do You Moan? | 2684-2 |

Music and words by Sam Butler except tracks 6, 7, 11, 12: Trad.

SET 1: DISC 4: Original vinyl release date: Jan1983 as
MSE 204 VARIOUS ARTISTS: RAGTIME BLUES GUITAR 1928 – 30
Subtitled: “Complete Recordings in Chronological Order” **52’53”**

**Bill (William) Moore, vcl acc by own gtr, or gtr solo with speech
(tracks 2, 6, 7, 8)**

- | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| 1 | One Way Gal (Moore) | 20309 -1 | Chicago c . Jan, 1928 |
| 2 | Ragtime Crazy (Moore) | 20310 -3 | – |
| 3 | Midnight Blues (Moore) | 20312 -2 | – |
| 4 | Ragtime Millionaire (Moore) | 20313 -1 | – |
| 5 | Tillee Lee (Moore) | 20314 -3 | – |
| 6 | Barbershop Rag (Moore) | 20315 -2 | – |
| 7 | Old Country Rock (Moore) | 20323 -1 | – |
| 8 | Raggin' The Blues (Moore) | 20324 -1 | – |

Stephen Tarter and Harry Gay: One or other vcl; acc by their own gtrs

- | | | | |
|----|----------------------|----------|-----------------------------|
| 9 | Brownie Blues (Trad) | 47279 -3 | Bristol, Tenn., Nov 2, 1928 |
| 10 | Unknown Blues (Trad) | 47280 -3 | – |

Bayless Rose, vcl acc by own gtr; or gtr solo (tracks 11, 14)

- | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|-------|------------------------------|
| 11 | Jamestown Exposition (Rose) | 16732 | Richmond, Ind., June 7, 1930 |
| 12 | Black Dog Blues (Rose) | 16733 | – |
| 13 | Original Blues (Trad) | 16735 | – |
| 14 | Frisco Blues (Rose) | 16739 | – |

Willie Walker, vcl /gtr, acc by Sam Brooks, gtr /vcl.

- | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 15 | Dupree Blues (Walker) | 151063 -2 | Atlanta, Dec. 6, 1930 |
| 16 | South Carolina Rag (Walker) | 151065 | – |
| 17 | South Carolina Rag (Walker) | 151065 -2 | – |

SET 1: DISC 5: Original vinyl release date: Jan 1983 as

MSE 205 PEG LEG HOWELL 1928-29

Subtitled: "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

43'39"

Peg Leg Howell, vcl/gtr/speech on 3, 4

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Please Ma'am Walkin' Blues | 146159-2 Atlanta, April 20, 1928 |
| 2 | Rock and Gravel Blues | 146160 -1 – |
| 3 | Low Down Rounder Blues | 146161 -1 – |
| 4 | Fairy Blues | 146162-2 – |

Peg Leg Howell and Eddie Anthony: Vcl duets, acc by own gtr and Anthony, vln

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| 5 | Banjo Blues | 147322-1 Atlanta, Oct. 27, 1928 |
| 6 | Turkey Buzzard Blues | 147343-2 Atlanta, Oct. 30, 1928 |

Peg Leg Howell, vcl/gtr

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|------------|
| 7 | Turtle Dove Blues | 147344-1 – |
| 8 | Walkin' Blues | 147345-2 – |

Peg Leg Howell, vcl/gtr, acc by prob Eddie Anthony, vln

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 9 | Broke And Hungry Blues | 148236-1 Atlanta, April 10, 1929 |
| 10 | Rolling Mill Blues | 148237-1 |

Peg Leg Howell and Jim Hill: Peg Leg Howell, gtr/vcl/speech on 13; Jim Hill, mand/vcl on 13/speech on 11, 12, 14

- | | | |
|----|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 11 | Ball And Chain Blues | 148270-2 Atlanta, April 13, 1929 |
| 12 | Monkey Man Blues | 148271-2 – |
| 13 | Chittlin' Supper | 148272 -1 – |
| 14 | Away From Home | 148273-2 – |

SET 1: DISC 6: Original vinyl release date: Jan 1983 as

MSE 206 TEXAS ALEXANDER 1927 – 28

Subtitled: "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order" **51'41"**

Alger "Texas Alexander", vcl acc by Lonnie Johnson, gtr

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---------|--------------------|
| 1 | Range in My Kitchen Blues | 81212-B | N.Y., Aug 11, 1927 |
| 2 | Long Lonesome Day Blues | 81213-A | – |
| 3 | Corn-Bread Blues | 81223-A | N.Y., Aug 12, 1927 |
| 4 | Section Gang Blues | 81224-B | – |
| 5 | Levee Camp Moan Blues | 81225-B | – |

Texas Alexander, vcl acc by Eddie Heywood, pno

- | | | | |
|----|---|---------|--------------------|
| 6 | Mama, I Heard You Brought It Right
Back Home | 81235-B | N.Y., Aug 16, 1927 |
| 7 | Farm Hand Blues | 81236-B | – |
| 8. | Evil Woman Blues | 81242-B | N.Y., Aug 17, 1927 |
| 9. | Sabine River Blues | 81243-B | – |

Alger "Texas Alexander", vcl acc by Lonnie Johnson, gtr

- | | | | |
|----|--|----------|--------------------------|
| 10 | Death Bed Blues * <i>poor original</i> | 400441-B | San Antonio, Mar 9, 1928 |
| 11 | Yellow Girl Blues | 400442-B | – |
| 12 | West Texas Blues | 400443-A | – |
| 13 | Bantam Rooster Blues | 400444 | – |
| 14 | Deep Blue Sea Blues | 400445-B | – |
| 15 | No More Women Blues | 400446-A | – |
| 16 | Don't You Wish Your Baby Was
Built Up Like Mine | 400448-A | – |
| 17 | Bell Cow Blues | 400449-B | – |

All titles composed Alger Alexander

**MSE201 COUNTRY BLUES –
THE FIRST GENERATION 1927**
Subtitled: "Complete Recordings"

Blues as a distinct form of black folk song was already a quarter of a century old when the first country singers from the American South were placed before unfamiliar horns and microphones to record their music. Quite how the blues began, and why it gained such rapid popularity that singers from the East Coast to West Texas could be found in such numbers and in such variety, may always remain a matter of speculation. But we can be sure that the first generation of singers who recorded blues were performers who knew the songs of other black secular traditions. Such was the case with three of them represented here: Papa Harvey Hull, Long Cleve Reed and Richard "Rabbit" Brown.

Several decades have passed since those few days between March and May in 1927 when they made these titles and today we know the voices and the songs of the singers better than we are ever likely to know the men themselves. But Richard Brown, apparently called "Rabbit" because of his small stature, is known to us at least in outline. He was a native of New Orleans where he grew up in the same James Alley between Gravier Street and Perdido Street where Louis Armstrong was born. A slum by a turpentine factory, it was near the tenderloin "district" of Storyville where he gained employment as a singer-guitarist, "serenading", as the casual street entertainment was termed. He also worked out at the resorts on Lake Pontchartrain, where he was heard by the recording director Ralph Peer. Brown was probably well into his forties when he made these few titles in his home city.

Harvey Hull and Cleve Reed are far more shadowy figures, and nothing specific is known about them. "*Have you ever took a trip babe on the Mobile Line?*" they sang on **France Blues**, leading some to speculate on an Alabama origin. But the M & O ran up the east side of Mississippi and there is much in the light finger-picking and rolling guitar rhythms to suggest that they came from the hill country of northern Mississippi. Cleve Reed appears in copyright lists as the composer of the popular Thirties blues-song, **Hey Lawdy Mama**, but this may just have been a confusion arising from the refrain of **France Blues**.

Most of the songs here relate to the period before the First World War, when blues was still competing with other song types. Rabbit Brown's **Never Let the Same Bee Sting You Twice** was a comic "battle of the sexes" song typical of the 1890's

vaudeville stage, while his **I'm Not Jealous** - "*I just don't like it, that's all*" – has evident minstrel and ragtime song characteristics in the verse and chorus structure of popular songs of the day, and in the deft and spirited guitar accompaniment. A reference to Rampart Street gave it a local touch but it was probably a song he had picked up from a travelling show.

More directly from the folk tradition were the ballads that Brown and Reed sang. Oldest of these was Cleve Reed's **Original Stack O'Lee Blues**, among the most complete versions on record of the famous levee ballad. By tradition, Billy Lyons is said to have been shot by the bully Stack Lee in a Memphis bar-room, probably in April 1906 – though police records do not confirm it. The couplet and one-line refrain structure of this and other contemporary ballads may have influenced the

shaping of the blues. A few years later, the sinking of the liner Titanic on her maiden voyage pointed a moral about pride and supposed infallibility which provided the theme for several songs, including Rabbit Brown's **Sinking of the Titanic**. This was probably already in the tradition but the long and local ballad of a kidnapping, **The Mystery of the Dunbar's Child** was almost certainly his own composition.

Only one of Brown's songs was a conventional blues (another, **Great Northern Blues** was unissued), but **James Alley Blues** was a subtle song with its lines built up of a series of oppositions, and its verse sequence divided between statements about himself and dissatisfied reproaches to his woman. Most of Hull and Reed's songs on the other hand, related to blues, though **Don't You Leave Me Here** was a version of a song widely

collected at the beginning of the century by this title, or as **Alabama Bound**. Early collections also included the words of **Gang of Brownskin Women**, particularly the theme of the "*woman for every day of the week*." On this they hummed, haahed and scat vocalised together in the manner popularised by black vocal quartets, while the refrain lines of **France Blues** also linked with the songs of these groups which were popular in the 1890s. **Two Little Tommies** (or Tonys) **Blues** conformed more closely to the emerging twelve-bar form, though one verse was of a single line repeated three times; another repeated twice. With **Mama You Don't Know How** though, we hear Cleve Reed's awareness of the newly famous recording blues singers: the first verse is modelled on Blind Lemon Jefferson's **Black Snake Blues**.

For these singers the blues was one of several song types from which they could draw, but already it was on its way to becoming the dominant black song form of the century.

**MSE 202 WALTER “BUDDY BOY”
HAWKINS: 1927 – 29**

*Subtitled: “Complete Recordings in
Chronological Order”*

Although serious field-work in blues research has been conducted for well over a score of years there are many gaps that remain to be closed. Walter Hawkins is a case in point – hardly a thing is known about him even though his recordings have been of considerable interest to blues enthusiasts for many years. It has been stated on more than one occasion that he came from Blythesville, Arkansas, but as far as I am aware no field research has been undertaken in that area to check the assertion. In view of the large

numbers of blues enthusiasts who have beaten the highways south from Memphis to the Mississippi Delta it is surprising that none have chosen to go into the virgin territory that lies in the opposite direction. Blythesville is a small community in Mississippi County, Arkansas which is situated in a lakes region at the extreme north-east of the state which nips into Missouri and Tennessee. It lies about sixty miles north of Memphis and was linked to it by railroad connections. Whether it turns out that Hawkins was from this interesting region or not, it is certainly an area which deserves local study.

As it happens Hawkins does not mention Blythesville on his records, but he does mention Jackson, Mississippi several times on **A Rag Blues**, stating that the piece comes from there. On **Snatch It Back Blues** he says "*Listen here people, these my blues I brought 'em all the way*

from Birmingham." If he did not come from either city he does show some awareness of them. There are some elements in his singing, particularly the rather strident, barking tone that he employs, that do suggest a link with other Alabama singers, though such speculations are highly subjective.

One aspect of his blues that may be significant is his reference to railroads. Though trains are a common theme in both blues and gospel song, working on the tracks is not. There are a few recordings by blues singers which are clearly related to work song – some by Texas Alexander (Matchbox Bluesmasters MSE 206) have already been discussed, and **Working on the Railroad** belongs to this small class. It is somewhat more descriptive: "*when you hear the captain call 'You men, let' s move that rail'*". He gives as an explanation

"my black woman she needs the money, that's why I work so hard; if I don't keep on rollin' she'll have another black man in my yard." Of course, it is possible that he may have projected himself into the situation but it is also reasonable to consider that the blues was directly related to his own experience. Railroad engines figure in **Number Three Blues**: "*I say I flagged Number Four mama, she kept on wheelin' by; I couldn't do anything, partner, but fold my little arms and cry*", And again, "*Here come Number Three with her headlight turned down; I believe to my soul she's Alabama bound.*" Though the verses of **Snatch It Back** are somewhat more conventional: "*I'm gonna lay my head mama down on some railroad track; so when that train come along I'm gonna snatch it back*" and, "*I can get more jet black women than that Southern freight train can hold*", he does use railroad imagery. To this we

might add his frequent reference to himself as "Buddy Boy" and to his equally frequent use of "Partner" as a rhetorical form of address. Both terms were common among hoboes in the 1920s, when asking the name or origins of fellow "vags" and "bos" was not encouraged. In this light his use of the phrase on **Awful Fix Blues** "*... I just strolled in your town; If I ask you for a favour please don't turn me down*" has added significance.

If Buddy Boy Hawkins had been a youthful hobo, and had worked on the railroad as a casual itinerant labourer, he would have been in a position to have picked up a variety of songs and instrumental pieces from other bums on the road. Apart from his blues which, in the case of **Jailhouse Fire** in particular, were quite original, he also played a number of ragtime dances and songs from the vaudeville and tent shows.

In the latter category are **How Come Mama Blues**, a country version of a popular vaudeville song, **How Come You Do Me Like You Do?** which had been recorded by Edith Wilson, Trixie Smith with the Original Memphis Five and many other singers and groups. **Snatch It and Grab It** is of this genre and is of the same tune family as Henry Thomas's **Fishing Blues**, among many other songs of similar type. It seems likely that Hawkins was himself an entertainer, possibly on the medicine shows, where **Voice Throwing Blues** would have been a good crowd-fetching act. Like the Charlie McCarthy show, there is something incongruous about ventriloquism on radio or on record, for the trick is only really effective in live performance. Voice throwing in particular, which requires an illusion of projection of the voice beyond the proximity of a ventriloquist and his dummy, has to be experienced in person. Hawkins however, used a

reedy, nasal second "voice" which can be produced with the lips parted and tongue movement alone; it is skilfully alternated with his natural singing voice on an old standard, **Hesitating Blues**. Evidently Buddy Boy Hawkins was a guitarist of considerable accomplishment, whose instrumental command and use of harmonic structures far in advance of most rural black musicians has been the subject of analysis by Jerome Epstein. In his playing Epstein detects classical Flamenco techniques, and he suggests that Hawkins picked them up in Europe during World War I. It's possible, though black troops were in the front line, and not on the Spanish border. More likely he picked up the Spanish sequences heard clearly on **A Rag Blues** from Mexicans in Texas as did Little Hat Jones. But whatever his sources, Buddy Boy Hawkins was a major figure in black country music.

**MSE 203 BO WEAVIL JACKSON
(SAM BUTLER): 1926**

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

In the documentation of the rural blues Bo Weavil Jackson remains as a rather enigmatic figure. He recorded only twice, making half a dozen titles at each session, with a couple of takes issued of his **Jefferson County Blues**. The sessions appear to have been only a few weeks apart, perhaps even less, and after the 30th of September 1926 he seems to have slipped back into the obscurity from whence he came.

According to the record salesman Harry Charles, who was interviewed forty years later by Gayle Dean Wardlow, he was found "*in the streets takin' up nickels.*" Charles, who was part owner of the E. E. Forbes Piano Company in Birmingham, Alabama, recalled that

Jackson's first name was James. It may well have been, but it may also have been Sam, for it was as Sam Butler that he recorded for Vocalion. Following a practice employed by musicians like George Thomas or later, Roosevelt Sykes, he might have used his mother's name for his recordings for a rival company. It was as Bo Weavil Jackson that he recorded first for Paramount, and this is likely to have been the name by which he was known, even though promoters had a penchant for giving their artists colourful sobriquets. This is suggested by **Devil and My Brown** a title which was then unissued. On it he sang in a blues version several verses of the **Ballad of the Boll Weevil**, which may well have been the tune by which he was known in Alabama. We can assume an origin in that state partly from the fact that Harry Charles found him there, partly because Birmingham is situated in Jefferson County, and

partly from some stylistic features in his work – even though Paramount referred to him as coming "*down from the Carolinas.*"

Bo Weavil Jackson may have been playing for coins in the street but he seems to have been a very accomplished guitarist, and a singer who was well aware of the recordings of other blues artists. **Devil and My Brown** for instance, is derived from a Tom Delaney composition, **Down Home Blues**, with its **Hey Lawdy Mama** tune, adapted to the Boll Weevil theme mentioned above. It seems that he was a synthesiser of various sources who moulded the songs that he heard as well as the blues and spirituals of recording singers to his own, individual way of singing and playing.

Some of Bo Weavil Jackson's blues clearly derive from traditional sources and are important in the identification

of the currents of standard themes that run through early blues. His first title for Paramount is a case in point; commencing with an eight-bar theme, **Pistol Blues** is a version of **Crow Jane**, a blues which is frequently associated with the Carolinas and which therefore appeared to give some support to the possibility that he had come from that region. But it is also well-known elsewhere as **Red River Blues** and even, with only a slight change of tune, as **How Long, How Long Blues**. Jeff Todd Titan in *Early Downhome Blues* (p 169) considers it as the core theme of a blues "tune family" which also includes **Key to the Highway** and **Slidin' Delta**. Though this is an aspect that clearly needs more research, Bo Weavil Jackson's **Pistol Blues** is one of the earliest recordings of the theme. Half way through, however, he changes the tune and moves to another form which – may be representative of an

early stage in the blues, a sixteen-bar, aaab sequence of a type already mentioned in connection with Papa Harvey Hull and Long Cleve Reed (Bluesmasters MSE 201).

Another blues which is of verifiable early date is **Poor Boy Blues** which is played by Jackson with beautiful slide guitar. At least as early as 1910 it was being played this way, as Howard Odum and Guy Johnson noted when they published it the following year. The "knife instrumental" as they called it, was "regularly associated with several songs" of which **Po' Boy Long Ways From Home** was one. Other versions include Blind Willie McTell's **Travelin' Blues**, Barbecue Bob's **Poor Boy A Long Ways From Home** and Banjo Joe (Gus Cannon)'s similarly titled piece.

Two takes exist of **Jefferson County** which give a good indication how a

folk blues singer associates certain blues stanzas with an overall theme, but changes their order or introduces new ones. Also sung to a slide guitar accompaniment with some fine bass runs, the versions include several references to Birmingham and Alabama. Another comparison may be made between the Paramount issued version of **You Can't Keep No Brown** and the alternative, unissued recording of the blues. Here again a few core themes or phrases are the unifying elements but each version is treated virtually as a new song. The latter seems to have been influenced to some extent by Blind Lemon Jefferson, whose guitar runs and closing coda he interprets rather than copies.

Textually, Bo Weavil Jackson's lyrics are interesting as examples of a use of a reservoir of blues stanzas rather than as examples of sequential narrative. Certain of his verses occur

in the records of "Classic" women singers, particularly Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and the latter singer would appear to have been an influence on his vocal style. Although his voice is strident and pitched fairly high, he uses an intonation and delivery that is close to Rainey's, particularly on **Why Do You Moan?** Generally his playing is more adventurous on his blues and he uses slide guitar in a church moaning style on gospel items. An early recording of **The Saints** as a solo piece is of interest, though he seems to have introduced a phrase from it in **Heaven Is My View**, which varies slightly from the usual tune. But this may have been deliberate: it would have been in keeping with the approach of a very individual artist who clearly liked to juxtapose and interweave melodies and accompaniments from different sources.

**MSE 204 VARIOUS ARTISTS:
Ragtime Blues Guitar 1928 – 30**
*Subtitled: "Complete Recordings in
Chronological Order"*

It seems that the blues appeared in the Old South several years later than it did in the states closer to, or beyond, the Mississippi. In the 18th Century the settlement of the eastern seaboard states had extended beyond the big plantations of the tidewater regions into the rolling hills of the Piedmont, stretching from Virginia southwards, through the Carolinas to the northern half of Georgia. Perhaps the physical and cultural divide of the ranges of the Blue Ridge and the Appalachians, which had formed such a barrier to early settlers, also acted as a watershed between the black cultures of the Old South and the New. Whatever the reason, the older styles of song and dance persisted in the Piedmont, and as the researches

of Bruce Bastin, Peter Lowry and Kip Lornell have shown, survive there to some degree even today.

So it is not surprising to find that country dances and jigs, ragtime rhythms played with great virtuosity, minstrel songs and other older traditions were predominant in the recordings of Piedmont musicians, even when they played blues. All these elements are evident in the playing of William Moore, who was born in Georgia in 1894 but who moved with his parents to Virginia eight years later. He lived for many years at Tappahannock, the county seat of Essex county on the Rappahannock River, to which he refers on **Old Country Rock**, a slow drag dance with sliding notes for the drawn steps. He was a barber – "*the only barber in the world can shave ya and give ya music while he's doin' it*" as he claimed on **Barbershop Rag**. His injunctions to the assistant

to bring water and brush, strap the razor with a feather edge and "*shine that man's shoes*", are complemented on the guitar.

It seems likely that Moore was a barber for white clients too, who could well have been entertained with his **Ragtime Millionaire**, an Edwardian fantasy of a poor man who drives a '28 automobile, takes his "sweetie" to a ball, and brushes his teeth with diamond dust. Or they were amused at the description of **Tillie Lee**, "*my yellow honey-bee, she's bow-legged and lazy, cockeyed and crazy*", and much else. Even when **Raggin' the Blues** Moore was playing a ragtime dance with stop time steps. "*Jazz 'em boy, jazz 'em*" he drawled, but it was more ragtime than jazz or blues. He was mainly a dance musician playing sand-dance time on the "flang-dang" piece, **Ragtime Crazy**, on which he called on the children to "*go crazy ... look*

foolish, cross-eyed and everything." Such novelty steps lasted for many years in black rural dance. When he played blues, as on **One Way Gal** or **Midnight Blues**, William Moore displayed his remarkable skill, using the slid drag notes to blues effect. He used a four-line form on both, and two verses of **Mamie Desdume's Blues**, as recalled by Jelly-Roll Morton, creep into **One Way Gal**. Traditional blues verses also figure strongly in the two blues by Steve Tarter and Harry Gay, who lived at Gate City, Virginia and who played for the miners in the coal mining camps of southwestern Virginia. The vocals were taken by Tarter, who also played lead guitar, excellently supported by Gay. They were primarily ragtime guitarists and typical of such musicians who assimilated the new blues, did not sound particularly involved in the content of their songs.

Nothing is known of Bayless Rose, and it has even been suggested that he was a white musician. Nevertheless he sang and played blues in a manner characteristic of musicians of the northern Piedmont, including **Black Dog Blues**, a variant of **Honey Where You Been So Long**, which admittedly, was popular among white singers. Capable of fast finger-picking, he displayed a hint of old-time banjo technique on his **Frisco Blues**. His instrumental **Jamestown Exposition** refers to the Tri-centennial celebrations held in Jamestown Virginia, in 1907, which he may well have attended and played at as a young man.

One can only guess at the extent of the undiscovered talent that existed in this much neglected area from the few examples by these obscure, but in most cases, locally famous musicians. Willie Walker is an outstanding case in point,

remembered by Josh White as "*the best guitarist I've ever heard ... this man played so much guitar it wasn't even funny.*" How much guitar is evident on the two takes of the beautiful **South Carolina Rag** on which he was accompanied by carpenter and guitarist, Sam Brooks, who also acted as his guide, for Willie Walker was born blind in 1896. He lived and played around Greenville, South Carolina where he was widely recalled as an exceptional singer and musician with a repertoire which is only hinted at by his version of the old ballad **Betty and Dupree**, which he called **Dupree Blues**.

Unfortunately, the Piedmont singers were not sought out so rigorously as those in say, Memphis and Mississippi and none of these men recorded again. Blind Willie Walker died in 1933 and Stephen Tarter a few years later. But William Moore

lived until 1955, Sam Brooks to the late 60s and Harry Gay was reported as still living at that time. Because these were more laconic singers than those from further west they have been largely overlooked, but their relaxed vocals, casual air and breathtaking instrumental command created an alternative, distinctive model of a regional blues approach deeply rooted in older traditions.

MSE 205 PEG LEG HOWELL: Peg Leg Howell (1928 – 29)

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

When Peg Leg Howell recorded for the Columbia field unit in Atlanta in 1928 he had the experience of some four sessions behind him. He was now forty years old, he'd been living in the city for some five years and was a familiar figure on Decatur Street, the main commercial centre of the black community at the time.

Columbia had no difficulty in finding him for Peg Leg was finding the income from his records very welcome and he was always ready when the unit came. Columbia's visits were regularly in April and the beginning of November giving a dependable singer like him time to get together a number of songs. And there was always Dan Hornsby or Harry Charles around to prompt him to be ready, local men who acted as talent scouts. Dan Hornsby even had his own group "*Daniel and his Lion's Den Trio*" as he advertised it, and even though his musical approach was different he, like many other white people in Atlanta, appreciated Howell's country music.

Although the "Gang" with its intermittent personnel of Henry Williams, the guitarist, banjo player Ollie Griffin and mandolin player Jim Hill were working with him on the streets or at occasional local

functions, it was Eddie Anthony who was Peg Leg's closest friend and companion. It was a loose, casual group and Howell played a good deal on his own, listening to the music of other musicians, recalling the country tunes of his youth, composing a new song or two. While he was recording he was getting \$25 a side and the royalty payments from Columbia came regularly twice a year. He was quite famous for a while with the growing local popularity of his records, getting occasional engagements. But, as he explained to George Mitchell who interviewed him shortly before he died, "*After the record came out, I used to sing different places around Atlanta, different places where I went. I mostly played along the street.*"

Because of his age, his experience and his interest in all kinds of rural music Peg Leg Howell was one of the most extensively recorded of

singers in the older styles and one of the most absorbing. His first title in 1928 **Please Ma'am** is a case in point; what other singer made an entire recording of virtually a one-line blues? "*Please ma'am, babe take me back, try me one more time, please ma'am. I'm a poor old boy, beggin' you, take me back, if you please, please ma'am, try me one, one more time; won't do wrong, no more, please ma'am*" It seems a very simple song and yet the timing and the phrasing of the short word clusters is very compelling. As in other Peg Leg Howell recordings odd fragments of vocabulary unusual in blues crop up: "*beggin' you, I acknowledge, I've done wrong.*" It seems possible that this was based on the type of song noted by early collectors as an "over-and-over" in which a simple phrase was repeated in many ways. Some of Peg Leg Howell's recordings seem to relate to his youth, like **Low Down Rounder**

Blues in which he admitted that "*my mother told me all the time, but I was just a wayward child, I just wouldn't listen to her.*" This is a blues of disaffection and alienation, as are several others among his recordings. The mood of this session was sombre and Howell himself recalled "*that's really about the blues, that **Rocks and Gravel.***" But he was evidently more cheerful the following April when Eddie Anthony re-joined him to sing a number of standard verses on **Banjo Blues** to a lilting dance time. **Turkey Buzzard** was an old-time country-dance theme, widely known as **Turkey in the Straw** and probably the kind of music that they played for white listeners. Without Anthony he returned to lugubrious blues with simple but effective guitar accompaniment. For some reason or other, a somewhat sweeter sounding violin player joined him for the session on April 10th, 1929 – perhaps Columbia found Eddie's

music too raw. Though Peg Leg recorded blues in the conventional 12-bar form it is worth noting that **Turtle Dove** was of the 16-bar type, while **Rolling Mill** was an eight-bar blues with strong associations with the traditional white blues ballad **900 Miles**.

At his last session Peg Leg Howell was joined by Jim Hill who contributed some wry comments on **Ball and Chain**, a blues which suggests that Howell's own prison sentence was in his mind. At that date, and for many years after, convicts worked in the chain gang or were fettered to an iron ball when sent to the mines to "*work out their time.*" **Monkey Man** hit a lighter note, a song which related to the comic items like **The Cat's Got the Measles**, popular in the medicine shows. **Chittlin' Supper** had a jangling, "music-box" accompaniment from Jim Hill's mandolin, and he also

imitated the piano player at the function. Less successful, it must be admitted, were Jim Hill's attempts to sing.

Columbia visited Atlanta three more times but regrettably Peg Leg Howell was dropped, even though Barbecue Bob was still making titles for the company. "*After I stopped recording, I just played around town. I went back to selling liquor*" Peg Leg recalled. The death of Eddie Anthony in 1934 saddened him greatly and he did not feel like playing music any more.

The rest of his life was difficult: around 1940 he ran a wood-yard for a while, but he was suffering from sugar diabetes and in 1952 had to have his other leg amputated. When George Mitchell was shown his house by two men from Shorter's Barber Shop he found the old singer in dire straits, living on welfare,

bound to a wheelchair, his voice and his music all but gone. Three years later he was admitted to the Grady Memorial Hospital, Atlanta, where he died on August 11, 1966.

MSE 206 TEXAS ALEXANDER:
Texas Alexander Vol.1 (1927 – 28)
Subtitled: Complete Recordings in Chronological Order

A broad swathe of country runs northwest across Texas from Galveston Bay on the Gulf coast between the Brazos and the Trinity rivers. To the south Houston and Galveston lie within it; to the north so do Fort Worth and Dallas. Between them are Navasota and Huntsville, Corsicana and Waxahachie, townships which once were alive with the creaking of wagons, the calls of mule-skinners and the singing of the bluesmen at the railroad depots. It is still fertile country, undulating and much of it well timbered; farming

country with some cattle raising, and in the river bottom lands, extensive cotton-fields. Leon County is about half-way, very rural with less than a thousand inhabitants in even its county seat, Centerville. It was on a farm in the county that Alger (Algernon) Alexander was born in a share-cropping family in, probably, the late-1890s. Earlier dates have been suggested but Lonnie Johnson, born 1894, thought Alexander was his junior by a few years.

Alger "Texas" Alexander has not been served well by writers on blues or by reissues of his recordings. Yet he was in his day, one of the most popular blues singers on record. He might well be said to have been the quintessential blues singer for all his sixty-six issued titles (including two post-war) were blues of the most rural kind. Moreover, he was such a blues singer that he did not even attempt to play an instrument, being

satisfied to holler on a street corner or in a bar without any accompaniment. Sometimes he carried a guitar; not to play it himself, but to have it available for any young instrumentalist who wanted to try and back up a man who was famous throughout central East Texas.

Normangee in south Leon County was Alexander's home ground but, as a heavily-built and strong field hand, he was always able to obtain work when he wandered away from home. Unconfirmed reports suggest that he "got into trouble" perhaps attempted homicide in Fort Worth and that he spent a period on the Ramsey Unit of the Texas penitentiary system. It seems likely, for there was plenty of circumstantial evidence of close familiarity with prison songs in his first recordings. In 1927 he was again in the city, working as a store-man in a Dallas warehouse where his strength and

big frame were put to good use. But he also made "spending change" by singing in neighbourhood bars and in the streets of Dallas around the Central Tracks area, a vivid, if notorious, sector where black singers and musicians were to be heard at the Tip Top Club and Ella B. Moore's Park Theatre, as well as in the numerous dives. It was there he was heard by pianist Sam Price, then working in Ashford's record store, who had earlier been responsible for securing a recording date for Blind Lemon Jefferson.

He had been looking for new talent and recognised in Alexander's heavy, slow moaning style, singing of quality. *"Texas Alexander had an uncanny voice"* Sam Price told me. *"but he couldn't keep time. That was one of the things I had to teach him; he could sing, he had a good voice, but he couldn't sing in tempo."*

Arrangements were made for "Texas" Alexander, as he was dubbed, to record in New York, and for the skilled guitarist Lonnie Johnson to accompany him. It wasn't easy, as Lonnie Johnson explained to me: *"He was a very difficult singer to accompany; he was liable to jump a bar, or five bars, or anything. You just had to be a fast thinker to play for Texas Alexander. When you been out there with him you done nine days work in one! Believe me, brother, he was hard to play for. He would jump – jump keys, anything. You just have to watch him, that's all."* But Lonnie's relaxed picking and resonant sound – he played a twelve-string guitar in a highly individual way – was ideal for Alger's low moaning and full-chested singing. A blues like **Levee Camp Moan** illustrates the problem of playing for Alexander with the irregular verses of one line, or three,

or even four. His verse structure is unexpected, even reversing the customary order of a blues stanza, while the words and the moaned or hummed phrases are right out of the levee camp. **Section Gang Blues** too, is clearly a work song of the kind sung with a railroad crew of "gandy-dancers" employed to "line track." Its appeals to the captain of the crew and to the water-boy are traditional in the work song, but the request for Battle-Ax chewing tobacco and the ingenuousness of his lines "*Nigger lick molasses and the white man licks it too / Lord, I wonder what in the world is the Mexican gonna do*" have the authenticity of verses drawn straight from the experience of gang work. This was the first coupling of Texas Alexander's to be issued, and its uncompromising nature and complete lack of artifice made it instantly appealing to black rural audiences. Sales were unexpectedly

high, so other recordings made in August 1927 were released and a session nearer home in San Antonio, Texas was arranged for March the following year.

Alger Alexander was impressed by New York and in turn intended to impress the New York women, as he declared on **Range in My Kitchen**.

But he was ill at ease in his new suit; awkward with the props in the photographer's studio; uncomfortable with a theatre pit pianist like Eddie Heywood and only too glad to get back to the bottomlands.

All notes by: PAUL OLIVER

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