

Matchbox
Bluesmaster
Series - set 2



MSESET2
6 CD set

COUNTRY BLUES
and
GREAT HARP PLAYERS 1927-32

Skip James
Coley Jones & The Dallas String Band
Great Harp Players
Leroy Carr
Tommie Bradley - James Cole Groups
Charlie Lincoln

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, Hans Maitner

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 (marked *)**

**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 2: DISC 1: Original vinyl release date: Jan or Feb 1983 as

MSE207 SKIP JAMES 1931

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

52'43"

Grafton, Wis., c. Feb 1931 (* denotes poor quality original 78)

Nehemiah "Skip" James, vcl acc. by own gtr.

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Devil Got My Woman | L-746-1 |
| 2 | Cypress Grove Blues | L-747-2 |
| 3 | Cherry Ball Blues | L-748-2 |
| 4 | Illinois Blues | L-749-1 |
| 5 | 4 O'Clock Blues * | L-750-1 |
| 6 | Hard-Luck Child * | L-751-2 |
| 7 | Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues | L-752-2 |
| 8 | Yola My Blues Away | L-753-2 |
| 9 | Jesus Is a Mighty Good Leader | L-754-1 |
| 10 | Be Ready When He Comes | L-755-2 |
| 11 | Drunken Spree | L-758-2 |
| 12 | I'm So Glad | L-759-1 |
| 13 | Special Rider Blues * | L-760-2 |

Skip James, vcl acc. by own pno; with own foot-tapping where audible.

- | | | |
|----|--|---------|
| 14 | How Long "Buck" * | L-761-1 |
| 15 | Little Cow and Calf Is Gonna Die Blues | L-763-1 |
| 16 | What Am I To Do Blues * | L-764-1 |
| 17 | 22-20 Blues | L-765-1 |
| 18 | If You Haven't Had Any Hay, Get On Down the Road | L-766-1 |

All titles composed by Nehemiah James

SET 2: DISC 2: Original vinyl release date: May 1983 as

MSE208 COLEY JONES & THE DALLAS STRING BAND 1927-29

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

51'21"

Coley Jones, vcl/gtr

1 Army Mule In No Man's Land 145324-1 Dallas, Tex., Dec 3, 1927

2 Traveling Man 145329- Dallas, Tex., Dec 4, 1927

Dallas String Band: Coley Jones, md/vcl (on track 4); unknown, 2nd md; prob. Sam Harris, gtr; Marco Washington, sb; three-voice chorus presumably members of the group on track 4

3 Dallas Rag 145343-2 Dallas, Tex., Dec 6, 1927

4 Sweet Mama Blues 145344-3 –

Dallas String Band with Coley Jones: three unknowns, vcl; acc. Coley Jones, md; others prob. same group as, or similar to, the Dallas String Band on Dec 6, 1927

5 So Tired 147612-1 Dallas, Tex., Dec 8, 1928

6 Hokum Blues 147613-1 –

7 Chasin' Rainbows 147622-2 Dallas, Tex., Dec 9, 1928

8 I Used To Call Her Baby 147623-2 –

Bobbie Cadillac and Coley Jones, vcl duets; acc. poss. Alex Moore, pno; Coley Jones, gtr

9 I Can't Stand That 149536-2 Dallas, Tex., Dec 5, 1929

10 He Throws That Thing 149537-1 –

Coley Jones, vcl/gtr

11 Drunkard's Special 149558-2 Dallas, Tex., Dec 6, 1929

12 The Elder's He's My Man 149559-2 –

Bobbie Cadillac and Coley Jones, vcl duets; acc. poss. Alex Moore, pno;

Coley Jones, gtr

- 13 Listen Everybody 149566-1 Dallas, Tex., Dec 6, 1929
14 Easin' In 149567-1 –

Dallas String Band with Coley Jones: as for Dec 8, 1928

- 15 Shine 149568-2 Dallas, Tex., Dec 6, 1929
16 Sugar Blues 149569-1 –

SET 2: DISC 3: Original vinyl release date: May 1983 as

MSE209 GREAT HARP PLAYERS 1927–30

Subtitled “Complete Recordings in Chronological Order” **56'30”**

William Francis, gtr; Richard Sowell, hca

- 1 John Henry Blues E-4603 New York City, Feb 28, 1927
2 Roubin Blues E-4606 –

El Watson, hca solo; acc Charles Johnson, gtr on track 3

- 3 Pot Licker Blues 39732-2 Bristol, Tenn., July 28, 1927
4 Narrow Gauge Blues 39733-2 –

El Watson, hca solo/speech on track 5; acc. Robert Cooksey, hca on track 5/ speech on track 6; unknown, bones on track 6; Watson or Cooksey, vcl effects on track 5

- 5 El Watson's Fox Chase 43952-2 New York City, May 7, 1928
6 Bay Rum Blues 43953-2 –
7 Sweet Bunch of Daisies 43954-2 –
8 One Sock Blues 43955-2 –

Palmer McAbee, hca

- 9 Lost Boy Blues 41929-2 Atlanta, Ga., Feb 21, 1928

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 10 | McAbee's Railroad Piece | 41930-2 – |
| Freeman Stowers, hca solo (tracks 11,13), animal imitations (tracks 12,14), speech (track 11) | | |
| 11 | Railroad Blues | 14711 Richmond, Ind., Jan 19, 1929 |
| 12 | Texas Wild Cat Chase | 14898 Richmond, Ind., Mar 11, 1929 |
| 13 | Medley Of Blues | 14899 – |
| (All Out and Down; Old Time Blues; Hog In the Mountain) | | |
| 14 | Sunrise On the Farm | 14900-B – |
| Blues Birdhead (James Simons), hca solo; acc, unkown pno | | |
| 15 | Mean Low Blues | 403111-A |
| Richmond, Va., Oct 13, 1929 | | |
| 16 | Harmonica Blues | 403112-A – |
| Alfred Lewis, hca solo/vcl effects/speech | | |
| 17 | Mississippi Swamp Moan | C-4481 Chicago, May 5, 1930 |
| 18 | Friday Moan Blues | C-4482 – |

SET 2: DISC 4: Original vinyl release date: May 1983 as
MSE210 LEROY CARR 1928

Leroy Carr, vcl/pno, Scrapper Blackwell, gtr

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order" **41'06"**

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | My Own Lonesome Blues | IND-622-A |
| | | Indianapolis, Ind. June 19, 1928 |
| 2 | How Long, How Long Blues | IND-623-A – |
| 3 | Broken Spoke Blues | C-2219 Chicago, Aug 13, 1928 |
| 4 | Tennessee Blues | C-2220 Chicago, Aug 14, 1928 |

5	Truthful Blues	C-2221 –
6	Mean Old Train Blues	C-2222 –
7	You Got To Reap What You Sow	C-2223 –
8	Low Down Dirty Blues	C-2224 –
9	How Long How Long Blues No. 2	C-2688-A Chicago, Dec 19, 1928
10	How Long How Long Blues Part 3	C-2689-A –
11	Baby Don't You Love Me No More	C-2690-A –
12	Tired Of Your Low Down Ways	C-2691-B –
13	I'm Going Away and Leave My Baby	C-2692-B Chicago, Dec 20, 1928
14	Prison Bound Blues	C-2694-A –
15	You Don't Mean Me No Good	C-2695 –

SET 2: DISC 5: Original vinyl release date: Sept 1983 as

MSE211 TOMMIE BRADLEY – JAMES COLE GROUPS 1930–32

Subtitled “Complete Recordings in Chronological Order”

46’30”

1	Mama Keep Your Yes Ma’am Clean (A)	16996 Richmond, Ind., Sep 4 1930
2	Everybody Got Somebody (A)	16998 –
3	Where You Been So Long? (B)	17083 Richmond, Ind., Sept 27, 1930
4	Adam and Eve (C)	17084 –
5	Runnin’ Wild (D)	17204 Richmond, Ind., Oct 27, 1930
6	Sweet Lizzie (D)	17205 –
7	Pack Up Her Trunk Blues (E)	17206 –
8	When You’re Down and Out (C)	17883 Richmond, Ind., July 17, 1931
9	Please Don’t Act That Way (C)	17884 –
10	I Love My Mary (F)	17885 –

11 Four Day Blues (B)	17886 –
12 Undertaker Blues (G)	18323 Richmond, Ind., Jan 16, 1932
13 Mistreated the Only Friend You Had (H)	18324 –
14 Nobody's Business If I Do (I)	18325 –
15 Window Pane Blues (I)	18326 –

- A = Walter Cole, vcl; prob. James Cole, vn; prob. Sam Soward, pno;
prob. own gtr
- B = Tommie Bradley, vcl/gtr; unk, as; James Cole, vn/vcl on track 3;
Eddie Dimmitt, md; Roosevelt Pursley, jug on track 3
- C = Tommie Bradley, vcl/gtr; Eddie Dimmitt, md
- D = James Cole's Washboard Four: James Cole, vn; Tommie Bradley, gtr;
Eddie Dimmitt, md; unknown, wbd/kazoo on track 6
- E = Tommie Bradley, vcl/gtr; poss. Walter Cole or Eddie Dimmitt, gtr
- F = James Cole, vcl/vn; with Tommie Bradley, gtr; Eddie Dimmitt, md;
Roosevelt Pursley, jug
- G = Buster Johnson, vcl/gtr; James Cole, vn; Tommie Bradley, gtr; prob.
Eddie Dimmitt, md; unk. wbd
- H = James Cole, vcl/vn; poss. Sam Soward, pno; prob. Eddie Dimmitt, md;
Tommie Bradley or Buster Johnson, gtr; unknown, wbd
- I = Tommie Bradley, vcl/gtr; James Cole, vn on track 15;
prob. Eddie Dimmitt, md; unk. wbd

SET 2: DISC 6: Original vinyl release date: Sept 1983 as

MSE212 CHARLEY LINCOLN 1927-30

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

45'25"

(* denotes poor quality original 78)

Charley Lincoln, vcl/gtr

- | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | Jealous Hearted Blues | 145103-2 Atlanta, Ga., Nov 4, 1927 |
| 2 | Hard Luck Blues | 145104-2 – |
| 3 | Mojoe Blues | 145105-3 – |
| 4 | My Wife Drove Me From My Door | 145106- – |
| 5 | Country Breakdown | 145107-1 – |
| 6 | Chain Gang Trouble * | 145108-2 – |
| 7 | If It Looks Like Jelly, Shakes Like Jelly,
It Must Be Gelatine | 146016-1 Atlanta, Ga., April 11, 1928 |
| 8 | Ugly Papa | 146019-1 – |

**Nellie Florence, vcl; acc. poss. Charley Lincoln or poss. Barbecue Bob,
gtr/laughing/speech**

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 9 | Jacksonville Blues | 146174-1 Atlanta, Ga. April 21, 1928 |
| 10 | Midnight Weeping Blues | 146175-2 |

Charley Lincoln, vcl/gtr

- | | | |
|----|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 11 | Depot Blues | 147354-2 Atlanta, Ga., Oct 30, 1928 |
| 12 | Gamblin' Charley | 147355-2 – |
| 13 | Doodle Hole Blues | 150275-2 Atlanta, Ga., April 18, 1930 |
| 14 | Mama Don't Rush Me | 150276-2 – |

MSE 207 SKIP JAMES 1931

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

That single copies of previously undiscovered blues records should still be in existence after more than fifty years seems scarcely possible. But such a disc by a major bluesman was recovered quite recently: Paramount 13111, which revealed a further surprise that **What Am I To Do Blues** was not by Son House as had been previously thought, but by Skip James. It appears in this album, reissued for the first time, in a collection of the complete work of its uniquely talented composer.

Nehemiah James was born June 9th, 1902 on the Woodbine plantation near Benton in Yazoo County, Mississippi, about twenty miles south of Yazoo City. His father was a Baptist minister and an influence on him throughout his life; though he was to play in many rough joints in his young manhood he was never far from the church. A light dancer as a child he was called "Skippy" by his friends and the name "Skip"

remained with him. Clearly he had an early interest in music, beginning to play guitar from the age of eight or nine. A fiddle player named Green McCloud and his guitarist Henry Stuckey taught him some of the rudiments of his music. Though Skip was later to claim that all his songs were original there appears to have been a local Benton tradition which survivors such as Jack Owens were able to demonstrate in the 1960s. But there is no doubt that James, by his own admission an "odd fellow", developed a singular way of working within the local idiom.

Unlike many bluesmen Skip James had a fairly good education, going to High School in Yazoo City for a couple of years. But there were few opportunities for young blacks and in his teens he moved to Leona, Arkansas to work in a sawmill. The move was an important one for it introduced him to the piano playing of a local pianist, Will Crabtree. He learned to play piano from Crabtree, developing an unusual style in the process. It is possible that his piano playing, which shows no special

relationship to his approach to the guitar, may have been close to Crabtree's style, and that Crabtree in turn represented a localised Arkansas tradition. But the culpable lack of interest in researching blues piano has meant that the opportunities to investigate the possibility have already passed.

In the next few years Skip played for "country frolics" as he termed them, picnics and parties, occasional functions in dance halls and the joints of Jackson and Memphis. He was something of a loner and not enthusiastic about the world of juke and barrel-houses. By about 1925 he was registered at a divinity school in Memphis. Just a few years later he was playing around the Mississippi towns when H. C. Speir, the Jackson record salesman and talent scout invited him to audition. Skip barely played a couple of verses of his song before Speir stopped him and offered to sign him for a contract. The recordings on this album were the result.

To anyone hearing Skip James for

the first time, even on record, the sound of his voice is strangely ethereal; in person it was quite uncanny. His talking voice was medium-toned and he occasionally sang at this level, as he did on **Be Ready When He Comes**. Generally though, he pitched his voice extremely high, as he did on **Cypress Grove** or **Illinois Blues**. "*I used to cut a lot of timber in Cypress Grove*" he explained, and also at, or near, Jacksonville, Illinois, his songs coming from what he confirmed to Ed Morris was his "*self-experience*." Cypress Grove is not about cutting timber though, but the basis for a figure of speech: "*I'd rather be buried in some cypress grove, than have some woman Lord that I can't control*." **Hard Time Killing Floor Blues** was on the theme of the Depression, the economic collapse that ended his recording career just as it had begun: "*If I ever get off this killin' floor, I'll never get down this low no more*." His accompaniments to these blues were played with great sensitivity, but the guitar playing on

I'm So Glad with its extraordinarily rapid and clear finger-picking was of a quality virtually unparalleled by any other blues player.

Drunken Spree, one of the newly discovered items, enlarges our knowledge of Skip James at this time, being a ballad song which relates to the white tradition. **Special Rider** on the other hand, derives from Little Brother Montgomery whom he had befriended in Vicksburg, though Skip chose to play it on a guitar. After this, and apparently at the same session, he turned to the piano to perform a number of pieces in a vividly original style. Some of these relate indirectly to other blues of the day: **How Long "Buck"** is a version of Leroy Carr's **How Long How Long** but the short stabs of descending phrases are peculiarly Skip's own. **22.20 Blues** too, is one of the several blues composed around weapons, the numbers being an archaic method for expressing both calibre and percentage of cordite in the charge. But the oddly titled **Little Cow and**

Calf is Gonna Die and **If You Haven't Any Hay, Get on Down the Road** are as quirkish as the man who played them. On some of these piano pieces he stomped the time with his foot while still performing with cascading flurries of notes in his singular fashion.

Shortly after, James was ordained at the Missionary Baptist Church in Birmingham where his father now preached. He continued to do heavy work, labouring in an iron ore mine, but later he formed a gospel group and for several years travelled intermittently with it to Texas and elsewhere. In the 1950s he was working on a plantation in Tunica, Mississippi and it was at the Tunica hospital that John Fahey, Bill Barth and Harry Vestine found him in 1964, recovering from an operation. During the next four years he performed at festivals and clubs, toured in Europe and recorded a couple of albums.

Courteous, diffident, often seeming detached, not only from his surroundings, but from other blues singers too, he was quietly confident

in his own great talent. Not an easy man to get on with, he was nonetheless, unquestionably one of the most outstanding of all blues artists whose death on October 3rd, 1969 was an immeasurable loss to music.

MSE 208 COLEY JONES & THE DALLAS STRING BAND 1927–29
Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

It is to be expected that we base our knowledge of blues and related black music on the records that are available to us, and tend to overlook the importance of the idioms that are thinly represented on disc. This is particularly unfortunate when string bands are considered, because they were extremely active in black communities throughout the South during the period when the blues was emerging and maturing. Important string bands like Sid Hemphill's in Mississippi, Willie Walker's in the Carolinas and the Wright Brothers in Texas were not

sought out by the talent scouts: their reputations survive but not their music. Luckily, two bands of note were recorded: the Mississippi Sheiks and the Dallas String Band, the former led by Bo Chatmon and the latter by Coley Jones, the subject of this significant collection.

In Texas, everyone it seems, heard Coley Jones and the Dallas String Band in the 1920s and 30s, and the older people remember the band that his father, Old Man Coley, ran early in the century. It was a big family band with a varying personnel that sometimes included one or two violins, two guitars, at least one mandolin and a string bass. In later years it was noted for the clarinet playing of Jesse Hooker and sometimes a trumpet player would sit in. Most of the time it was a five or six piece string band which worked for dances, picnics and shows, or serenaded. "Serenading" bands were a feature of the South: string bands which performed in the streets, outside theatres, or in the courthouse squares. They would play

a tune for a small sum of money to serenade a lover, probably acquiring the technique from the Mexican bands and mariachi groups who played in south Texas. They were also known as "shivaree" bands, their name being a corruption of "charivari" by which Italian groups that played on home-made instruments were once known.

Coley was about forty when he recorded, so Alex Moore recalled, and this would place his date of birth before 1890. He had a brother Little Coley, or Kid Coley, (who may or may not be the singer who recorded under that name) who played fiddle; Sam Harris played guitar and the bass player was Marco Washington who had himself run a string band which included his stepson, Aaron Walker (later, T-Bone Walker) as a child guitarist. Coley Jones himself played guitar somewhat indifferently and mandolin which he played brilliantly. His voice was strong and coarsened by years of street singing, and his sense of timing was that of an experienced entertainer.

A group like the Dallas String Band played where they were wanted, and where they could draw a crowd. They were professional musicians who performed on Central Tracks in Dallas by Ella B. Moore's Park Theatre for the "sporting" people, appeared on stage at the Park from time to time, and entertained the crowds at ball games. They travelled from Tyler to Fort Worth, to Waco, to Austin, Houston and Beaumont – "*they had Texas covered*" T-Bone Walker said. They played for white dances and barbecues as well as black functions and all these facets of their performances are hinted at in their recordings.

Dallas Rag is one of the very few folk recordings of a rural rag, and if it were only for this beautifully integrated performance the name of the band would be assured. Each strain is made of a pair of sub-strains and the sequence of the fast piece is abbaabcba led with great elan by Coley's mandolin. "*Say Coley, can you sing?*" asks one member of the

group on Hokum Blues. "No" says Coley. *"I lost my voice in jail; I was always behind a few bars and could never get a key"*. The item was recorded just as the Hokum Boys were being recorded in Chicago and it is a moot point as to which group had the term on record first. The blues element is fairly conventional with familiar words, for a string band of this kind played blues as a song type rather than as a form for personal expression. This is evident too, on **Sweet Mama Blues**, which is equally well played.

Minstrel show songs were still popular: in fact Ella Moore had minstrel shows at the Park. It is probably through them and other stage productions that they picked up such a song as **So Tired** by Jack Little, who was also the composer of **A Shanty in Old Shanty Town**. Another show song is **Shine** by the black writers Cecil Mack, Lew Brown and Ford Dabney which was published in 1924; the String Band plays it with accomplishment and there's a hint of parody in Coley's

vocal. On **Sugar Blues**, composed in 1923 by Lucy Fletcher and Clarence Williams, he concludes with a scat vocal, but there is more than a touch of Jolson-styled singing and the "coon" song on **Chasin' Rainbows** and **I Used to Call Her Baby** set against jaunty playing and with occasional harmonising.

In the appropriate setting, at an entertainment or on stage. Coley was also a monologist, aiming a few light barbs at the church deacons with the **Elder He's My Man** (the label had a misprint) and his alleged affairs, and gently mocking on **Army Mule in No Man's Land**. His other solo items draw from both white and black traditions: **Drunkard's Special** is an 18th Century European song, known as **Our Goodman** (Child 274) in Britain and the eastern United States. while **Travelin' Man** was a standby of the minstrel shows and a popular folk song from Texas to Virginia. With Bobbie Cadillac, a Dallas woman of some reputation, he made four titles, all of them variants of **Tight Like That**.

Regrettably it seems that Coley Jones and the Dallas String Band's kind of "hokum blues" was not as appealing to the Chicago-based record companies as Georgia Tom and Tampa Red's urbane variety. In Texas the band continued to enjoy its state-wide fame, and throughout the 1930s provided music for both black and white functions. They did not record again though, and efforts to trace Coley Jones in the 1960s, or even to ascertain his subsequent career, were sadly unsuccessful.

MSE 209 VARIOUS ARTISTS: Great Harp Players (1929–30)
Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

There are many neglected areas of blues research, but one of the most seriously overlooked is blues harmonica playing. Only one book has been written on the subject – **Blues Harp** by Tony "Lillie Sun" Glover. Though written in a relentlessly mid-sixties hip style, it is an informative guide to anyone who

wants to play the instrument by studying a manual and is instructive on modern blues harmonica techniques. But it says little about origins and nothing about the early players who are to be heard here and who certainly did not learn to play from a manual. This selection gives many pointers to the formation of blues techniques on the "mouth harp" – since the beginning of the century the American term for the harmonica.

Modern harmonicas were first commercially developed by M. Höhner of Trossingen in Germany in 1857 but it was the influx of German immigrants at the end of the 19th Century that popularised the instrument in America. Even today the states with concentrations of German immigrants – Texas, the Carolinas, Illinois – also appear to have higher concentrations of black harp players. Bluesmen still play harmonicas made in Germany by Höhner or Holz, with the Höhner Marine Band ten-hole, twenty-reed instrument the most popular.

In common with concertina players and fiddlers, harmonica players seem to have learned much of their technique through mimicry. In an idiom like the blues, which is so dominated by the voice, it is not surprising if vocal elements of wailing and moaning are to be heard played on the harp. But the techniques may have been learned by other imitations. Freeman Stowers for instance, reveals on **Sunrise on the Farm**, a very close familiarity with animal noises which he convincingly imitates by purely vocal means. Dogs, chickens, cockerels, cats, cows, donkeys and hogs are all captured by "impressions." So his **Texas Wild Cat Chase** with its participants, Charlie and John, and dogs like Yellow-hammer, sound as if they are accurately portrayed as the wild cat is treed, spitting and snarling, before being killed by the dogs. In fact, the vocal imitation is more accurate than El Watson's **Fox Chase**, partly because Robert Cooksey's second harmonica overcrowds the sound, partly

because the **Fox Chase** here is still a tune. It is likely that the chase, which is still a standby for harp players, has its origins in fiddler's showcase playing of the same theme.

Another subject for mimicry was the train. Stowers imitates a journey from a platform parting to arrival in St. Louis, but he doesn't spend much time on starting off; his skill is in shrieking into the reeds to imitate the train whistle. A note in the Gennett ledgers after his name says "*the Cotton Belt Porter*" so perhaps this is a sound he had heard very often. Palmer Mc Abee's **Railroad Piece**, recorded in Atlanta is that of a player with a keen ear for nuances of sound, from the letting off steam at the start, to the flares of noise as the train is heard passing objects or trees and crossing bridges. He appears to use a form of cyclic breathing for the sustained fast-rolling passages and you can detect the sound of his intake of air. A ledger note "hillbilly" raises a doubt as to whether he is black, but chase

and train imitations were popular with white players too. **Lost Boy Blues** is also a kind of train improvisation with a slight dance beat, while **El Watson's Narrow Gauge Blues** imitates a "dummy line" train, or spur to the work camps, and has more of a blues character.

Playing for dancing was expected of any player with a melody instrument. Watson's **Bay Rum Blues** is a skipping dance of considerable age for it is modelled on **Polly Wolly Doodle**. He also contributes a waltz, **Sweet Bunch of Daisies**, which gives food for thought, for it was composed by Anita Owen in 1894 and made popular by a white singer, Phyllis Allen; perhaps Watson played it for white dances. Ballads were generally as good for dancing as they were useful as work songs, the sixteen-bar form of so many ballads fitting the structure of many country reels. The totally obscure William Francis and Richard Sowell recorded just two titles, both of them ballads and common among both white and black communities. Sowell, who played

harmonica, took **John Henry** at a medium pace and with a mellow quality, only occasionally introducing a more howling note. **Roubin Blues** is a ballad seldom recorded by black musicians and singers, but which was popular among white performers who also knew it as **Nine Hundred Miles**, which was a railroad song. And in fact, Richard Sowell does play a short and fast train imitation at one point.

Compared with these folk performances Blues Birdhead, as James Simon called himself, seems quite sophisticated. He obviously had been listening to records, especially those by Louis Armstrong. His **Mean Low Blues** owes a lot to Armstrong's solos, while **Harmonica Blues** is also jazzy in feeling, with a vaudeville tune of the type popularised by Butterbeans and Susie. Standard blues tunes also form a basis for Freeman Stowers' **Medley**, on which he plays **All Out and Down, Old Time Blues** and a blues tune of possible white derivation, **Hog in the Mountain**. **All Out and Down** was a favourite theme in Texas, apparently

confirming the evidence of the **Wild Cat Chase** that this was his state of origin. These then, were some of the routes into blues harmonica playing which find their resolution in **Pot Licker** and **One Sock**, played by Palmer MacAbee, on which he both states and "answers" each phrase on the harp. They gain their purest expression in the virtually unbroken improvisation by Alfred Lewis.

Mississippi Swamp Moan and **Friday Moan**, in which he sings and even shrieks into the reeds fragments of lines "... *Lord have mercy ... I'm gonn' play these blues for my baby ...*" His falsetto words are blended into the harp phrases so that the instrument becomes an extension of his voice. From the various sources of chase and train imitations, ballad and dance tunes, even jazz influences, the techniques of "cross harp" playing and bending of notes through lip, tongue and breath control were evolved, enabling the players to exploit the potential of the mouth harp as a blues instrument.

MSE210 LEROY CARR 1928

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

It is almost impossible for us, fifty-five years later to capture the sense of excitement and delight that Leroy Carr's first records brought to those who bought them in the late 1920s. It must have been a remarkable contrast to the singing of the barrelhouse blues pianists who played in the country joints and the house parties, as they half-shouted their lyrics above the noise of the dancers and the thunder of their own left-hand bass figures. Leroy Carr presented a new image for the blues singer which had a smoother contour and yet was drawn in with bold and strong tones.

Compared with the piano blues of his contemporaries Leroy Carr paralleled Lonnie Johnson's position in relation to the guitarists. They both had full command of their instruments, they both could play mean and lowdown if they wished. Yet they both had a certain

sophistication, a slightly suave style which was admired for its modernity and its urbane qualities which somehow did not get in the way of the essential nature of blues expression. This comes across in the opening stanza of Carr's very first recording, **My Own Lonesome Blues** with its moaning voice, moderately high pitch and steady, medium pace. All the same, it was the other side of the record, **How Long How Long Blues** which really made an impact. It wasn't entirely new; in fact Ida Cox had made her **How Long Daddy How Long** years before, and in its eight-bar structure and repeat of the title syllables it linked with the **Crow Jane** theme. But Carr's blues had a unique, yearning character which was curiously emphasised by his careful enunciation of the words; "*I cannot see no train...*" or "*it's deep down in my heart baby, there lies an aching pain...*" Somehow, the style and the timing were just right for the mood of the day.

At the time he started recording he was just twenty-three. The son of

John Carr and his wife Katie Dozier, Leroy was born in 1905 in Nashville but raised by his mother in Indianapolis. Duncan Schiedt, who interviewed Carr's sister Eva over twenty years ago, recounted her description of Leroy teaching himself in his mother's absence by playing the parlour player-piano. He seems to have been something of a handful; as a boy he ran away with a travelling circus and later served in the Army at Port Huachuca in Arizona, though he was considerably under age. He was tall though and noted for his amiable spirits which seem to have led him into an early marriage and fatherhood by the time he was eighteen.

Back in Indianapolis, or "Naptown" as the black sector was punningly but affectionately known, he was soon in the tough West side sector playing piano, and running a profitable little bootlegging business on the side. Unfortunately he was not too discreet with this operation and served time on the prison farm for his illegal "alky cooking". Alcohol was a problem for him in more ways than

one and he was soon notorious for the quantities of liquor that he could consume. In this he had the companionship of a drinking buddy, Francis "Scrapper" Blackwell, a part Cherokee Indian just two years his senior who played a clean-toned claw-picking style of guitar. They worked out a piano and guitar routine together which paid off well enough for Leroy to give up his menial job in a meat-packing plant. They were playing the spots on Indiana Avenue when they attracted the attention of Vocalion talent scout and these first memorable recordings were the result.

Blues like **Broken Spoke**, **Tennessee Blues** and **Truthful Blues** were all in a straight twelve-bar vein; they were taken at a medium or medium-slow pace in which the stompy piano did not intrude on Leroy's plaintive lyrics. His words were often poetically phrased even when dealing with familiar themes, and he had a way of embracing the listener by addressing him on the record: "*Have you ever*

been accused, and you ain't done nothin' wrong?," he asked on **Broken Spoke Blues**. There was a strong strain of nostalgia in many of his songs, but especially on **Tennessee Blues**. On this and on **Mean Old Train** someone shrilled imitations of a train whistle and tolled (out of key) a bell on the latter; it was unashamed hokum but somehow the innocent imitation came off, with the train rhythm of the piano bass figures. They were now becoming more confident; Scrapper Blackwell's guitar playing was more evident and they were experimenting with new tunes, as on their **You Got to Reap What You Sow**, which, his wife Margaret recalled to Duncan Scheidt, he sang to her when they separated. In contrast with its title **Low Down Dirty Blues** had a pretty introduction with a neat descending phrase, while the "new" versions of **How Long** used a walking bass and effective guitar runs. But the most ambitious titles were to come, **Baby Don't You Love Me No More** with its hummed verse introductions and rocking

piano, fractional pauses and repeat refrain was a particularly attractive theme, so memorable in fact that years later, in 1940, Leadbelly recorded it for a Bluebird session. **Tired of Your Lowdown Ways** was another innovative blues, on which Leroy half-spoke the lines of the verse against repeat notes by Scrapper Blackwell before going into a hard-rolling piano chorus. The suspension created by the spoken lines was exploited brilliantly in the eight-line concluding verse.

It was an exciting, exploratory phase but **I'm Going Away And Leave My Baby** was on the verge of sentimentality in both the melody and the delicate guitar runs, and did not have a strong piano bass to offset its sweetness. Vocalion decided not to issue it, but Carr and Blackwell were probably aware of the thin ground that they were treading and came in powerfully with **Prison Bound**, a narrative blues which is known to almost every blues pianist even today, and one of the duo's most remembered recordings. Scrapper's guitar responses were clear and

confident, and remained so on **You Don't Mean Me No Good**. It was a few days before Christmas 1928 and they could look back on an immensely successful six months. As the New Year approached they had every reason to be optimistic for Leroy Carr was now the best-known new name in blues.

MSE 211 TOMMIE BRADLEY – JAMES COLE GROUPS 1930–32
Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

Who was Tommie Bradley? Who was Walter Cole? There are very many major gaps in our knowledge of early blues, and these are most serious where the instrumental groups with a wider repertoire than blues, are concerned. In the case of Tommie Bradley and Walter Cole, there's nothing definite that has come to light, as far as I am aware. Their records are also confusing – so much so that even after three editions – John Godrich and Bob Dixon are still listing Tommie Bradley's records under his own

name, and again under that of James Cole. Part of the reason for the obscurity of these artists must be the fact that they recorded over fifty years ago, but part of the reason why we know so little about them is simply prejudice.

Until very recently there was little interest in groups like these, who played blues for part of the time, but included in their range a variety of other types of music and song. They were considered as being less "authentic" and to have compromised their music. Only now is there a growing awareness of the complexity of black folk music forms and their bearing on popular music, and this belated interest has developed at a time when the trails must have gone completely cold. Now, for the first time, the titles by the Bradley and Cole groups are brought together in recording order, and both the lively diversity and the intrinsic merit of their work becomes apparent.

The groups have differing personnels which file data have revealed. These are not complete: there's an alto saxophone player who

remains unknown; a washboard player too. On a couple of titles with James Cole, one Sam Soward played piano. Obviously, we know nothing about him, but in the search for information, his is an unusual name which might just provide a lead. These are not the instruments of a straight string band – like the Dallas String Band on Matchbox Bluesmaster MSE 208 – but of one augmented by instruments that are more suited to a dance hall, and a fixed location, than for street playing and serenading. Roosevelt Pursley, also an uncommon name, played jug on most sides. Where would one find combined washboard and jug accompanied string bands?

One hypothesis might be Memphis. Somehow it seems unlikely; the guitar playing hasn't the Memphis roll, and though there's some slight resemblance to the later Charlie Burse sides, the Bradley–Cole titles are more accomplished. Vocally, there are few connections one could identify with Memphis, but Bradley, James and Walter Cole, and Buster Johnson

have very similar voices, with a certain harsh edge and intonation which, I believe, places them in the "border" states of Kentucky or Ohio. Louisville, then? It's a possible source, but John Randolph and Fred Cox who have been researching Louisville jug bands, would have turned up something about them by now. Still, the possibility that Lockwood Lewis of the Dixieland Jug Blowers prompted the use of the alto sax can't be ruled out. As for the washboard player, he had an attack and use of cowbells and woodblocks that recalls Floyd Casey, who played for Clarence Williams. Before that Casey worked out of St. Louis on the riverboats. It's just one of the circumstantial fragments that inclines me to the view that these were Cincinatti groups – for doubtless Casey would have been heard on the boats at Cincinatti. There's other, firmer evidence, but this must wait to a later Bluesmaster issue.

First to record was Walter Cole, (probably the same person as Walter Coleman, who later recorded **Goin' to Cincinatti**). His two catchy,

amusing songs stick in the mind, and it is a pity that he didn't have more titles issued at this time. His **Everybody Got Somebody** has stompy piano by Sam Soward while James Cole saws away on fiddle; Cole accompanied Tommie Bradley a few days later on his first items, which have a smoother, dance-hall sound with the addition of the saxophone and harmonised singing. Bradley's version of the old minstrel show song **Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden** is slightly updated with its reference to the Suzie-Q dance. The tune is related to **Tickle Britches**, a favourite among small string bands.

James Cole's Washboard Band gave an opportunity for the boards player to show his stuff. **Runnin' Wild** was a sensational all-black show in 1923 for which much of the music, including **The Charleston**, was written by Cecil Mack and James P. Johnson. Over thirty recordings were made of the theme of the show and doubtless Cole's group could have learned it from a record. **Sweet Sue** was more recent,

having been written just a couple of years before by Will J. Harris and Victor Young; James Cole camouflaged it perfunctorily by calling it **Sweet Lizzie**, not apparently worried that "Lizzie" didn't fit the tune. It was a smash hit in 1928 and was readily available in sheet music.

Blues enters the recordings of members of the group with Tommie Bradley's **Pack Up Her Trunk**, based on Arthur Petties' **Out on Santa Fe** while **When You're Down and Out** was a version of Jimmie Cox's composition **Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out** which was made famous in Bessie Smith's recording, and only a few months before had been the last title made by Pine Top Smith. Tommie Bradley seems to have liked blues-songs; his version of **Nobody's Business If I Do** (incidentally, one of Bessie Smith's earliest titles) is a bouncy, swinging number. James Cole's **Mistreated The Only Friend You Had** gained a lot from Sam Soward's slow off-beat piano and it is a pity we didn't hear more of this player, or for

that matter, from Buster Johnson whose **Undertaker Blues**, pitched high like Bradley's **Window Pane**, is among the excellent small group blues performed by the group.

Perhaps this album will prompt someone to do some research on this unjustly neglected cluster of musicians – they could do worse than start in Cincinnati.

MSE 212 CHARLEY LINCOLN: 1927 – 30

Subtitled "Complete Recordings in Chronological Order"

Atlanta, Georgia played an important part in blues history in the 1920s. It was the location for the earliest field recording by a rural blues singer, the obscure Ed Andrews, who was recorded there as early as March 1924. The subject of this collection, Charley Hicks – or "Lincoln" –? was already living there at that time, but it was some three years before Columbia recorded his brother, Barbecue Bob, and a further six months before Charley was himself recorded. It had to be in that order it

seems, for his brother Robert, younger by two years, was much the more outgoing of the two and would have been more "visible" to the talent scouts. It was almost certainly Bob who got his elder brother on record.

Charley Hicks had been playing guitar for about a dozen years by then. He had been born on a farm in Walton or Clarke county to the east of Atlanta where he worked in the cotton-fields and reportedly, saved enough money from picking cotton to buy his first guitar. Savannah Weaver, the mother of Curley Weaver, another well-known guitarist of the Atlanta school, taught him to play, and with his brother he began playing for picnics and country suppers. They moved closer to Atlanta, to the small town of Lithonia – now virtually a suburb of the city. Then Charley got married and, doing odd jobs and playing for cash when he could, he tried to settle down.

Of the two Robert was more restless, but he was also more dynamic and it was his playing for a barbecue stand at Buckhead, a

rather select area to the north-east of the city, which earned him the name of "Barbecue Bob" and which got engagements for the two of them. Charley was recalled as being a moody and often morose person, which his laughter on record seems to belie. But it is a mirthless laugh, almost a minstrel entertainment laugh, and it opens such sombre items as **Jealous Hearted** and **Mojo Blues**: he was probably the only blues singer to make his recording debut with laughter, whatever he meant by it.

Jealous Hearted Blues is a couplet-and-refrain song, modelled on **Sweet Patunia**, an apparent favourite among members of this group of blues singers. It was the first title to be recorded by Curley Weaver, and Willie Baker made no less than four recordings of it, though only the last was acceptable to the Gennett company. The unidentified Willie Baker also made **No No Blues** as well as a couple of remakes of the title, which Curley Weaver also chose for his first session; perhaps "Dip"

Weaver, as Savannah was nicknamed, introduced it to the whole group. Barbecue Bob made the latter a couple of times, as **Yo-Yo Blues**, but it seems it was too fast for Charley, who preferred slower tempos. He made another title which he shared with Willie Baker, **Mama Don't Rush Me**, which further suggests a link between these singers, while the manner of playing guitar is close to Curley Weaver's, using a slide on the strings. The tune was one that had been recorded only a month before as **Sittin' on Top of the World** by the Mississippi Sheiks, though the close proximity of the dates suggests that it was not derived from this; in fact Leroy Carr's **You Got to Reap What You Sow** (MSE 210) is essentially the same tune.

Generally, Charley Lincoln's guitar playing was far less smooth and accomplished than Barbecue Bob's, using just one or two chords and simple phrases. His voice though, was strong and expressive,

with a rich timbre and probably the saddest tone on record, as on the sober **Hard Luck Blues**. **Country Breakdown** is a title that arouses expectations of lively dance rhythms, but it too, is a slow blues which he sings with his voice pitched a little higher than normally. Of his twelve-bar, three-line blues **Gamblin'** **Charley** is probably the most directly related to his way of life, with its admission to a gambling obsession that has left just about all his possessions and those of his woman, Sally, in pawn.

Not all his recordings were in the standard blues form. **Chain Gang Trouble** is an eight-bar blues which relates directly to Peg Leg Howell's **Rolling Mill** (MSE 205) and which includes a "Captain" verse suggesting a link with work song. Barbecue Bob is known to have worked on a medicine show; the same has not been said of Charley, but both **If It Looks Like Jelly** and **Ugly Papa** have the structure of show songs. The former appears to be a play on the folk saying "*if it*

looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, it must be a duck", while **Ugly Papa** is a version of **It Won't Be Long**, a medicine show standard. If **It Looks Like Jelly** is of course, a sexual inuendo, and so is **Doodle Hole Blues**, which is also to a verse and refrain form. But they are sad versions of mild erotica and Charley seems to have had little relish in them. He may not have had too much success with women: his first marriage (which probably provided the name Lincoln) soon failed, and so did his second marriage to Annie Thomas. Behind the tough singing, of Nellie Florence, Charley's raucous

laugh and exaggerated hoot sounds distinctly chauvinistic.

Barbecue Bob died suddenly of pneumonia in 1930, and his loss deeply affected Charley. He became notorious for his drinking and his moods, which often got him in trouble with the police. Then, on Christmas Day, 1955, he killed a man in South Georgia on the Florida border and was committed to prison in Cairo, Thomas County. There, eight years later, he died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-three.

All notes by: Paul Oliver

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