MISSISSIPPI DELTA BLUES

in the 1960s – Vol. 1

An Introduction – by George Mitchell (1968)

To some, the Delta itself is deathlike, desolate and devoid of life. Those who roar down the endless, hill-less highways, made infamous in song by many a drifting bluesman, see nothing but the cloudless sky and monotonous cotton fields. But to the few who venture down one of the thousands of unnamed dirt roads that crisscross the land like a haphazard spider's web, roads so narrow you have to pull over to allow room for an oncoming pickup truck and so dry you have to keep the windows up to avoid the choking dust, the picture is different. It is one of hard packed, grassless yards but with a lone jonquil nursed to growth below the porch. One of ragged but sometimes laughing kids. Of impoverished but vital people.

The African Americans who live in the unpainted shacks along these forgotten roads are poor, hungry, unemployed. Understandably, their spirits often sag, but, through the years of persecution and exploitation, many have managed to develop a spirit that their persecutors and exploiters identify as simply the God-given nature of the 'happy nigger.' Few would accept that their 'niggers' have one up on them, that they are able to spit in the eye of what their "bossmen" have dished out to them and see life as something worth living in spite of their situation.

Take, for example, the words of Rosa Lee Hill, in her two-room shack in October, 1968, probably as a result of near starvation after her sharecropper husband finished his last crop deeper in debt than before he started it: "I'm real sad when, you know, something happens in the family or either I can't get hold of nothing. I'm real sad then. And sorry too. But through life I stay happy. Hardly ever I feel sad. I'm merry. I stay happy. The harder it get with me, the higher I hold my head up and that makes me feel better. See, if you fall, don't wallow, get up. And hold your head up. When it's hard for you, look up. Don't look down, look up. That's a good way to be, ain't it?"

Left:Fred McDowell and Johnny Woods

Right: Walter Miller

Rosa Lee, like scores of other Delta folk, had something to help her hold her head up—the blues. "I gets worried sometimes," Rosa Lee said, "and I sing the blues, it makes me feel better. That gives my mind ease. Makes me rest. When I get worried, that'll sing them worried blues away from me." Contrary to the folkways of the Delta, Ada Mae Anderson says it's a sin not to sing the blues. "It's just like this," she explained. "If you got anything in you and want to do it, sometimes it's a sin not to do it. If you do it a heap of times, it'll leave you. And that's the way I was about the blues. If it get with me and stay with me, sometimes if I didn't sing 'em in two or three days, they just stay with me. Then when I'd sing, they'd pass on off." Do-Boy Diamond put it like this: "That's the onliest thing that pacifies me. Make me feel, you know, uplifted and such a thing as that. Don't be feeling drowsified and dead."

More than a means of satisfying strong emotional needs and expressing the pains and joys of living, blues singing has been a way to gain status and money which could not be gained in any other way in the restrictive Delta environment. The bluesman has been almost idolized by the black people in the Delta, who put their hearts into listening no less than the singer does into singing. As Rosa Lee Hill said with pride of her father, Sid Hemphill, the most popular musician in the area around Senatobia before his death in 1961: "My daddy played everywhere. Down here at the Delta, up here in the hills, and play in Memphis just everywhere. Play for white till 10 o'clock and then play for colored till 12 at night. And he play music from Monday till Monday again. We didn't never have to do anything when my daddy was living. He just made his living playing music and teaching me and my sisters...And any way you go, this-a-way, go east, south, west, any way, they hear tell of Rosie."

But today, more and more, blues are no longer fulfilling these functions of emotional outlet, status and money. True, like the Delta's stark landscape, the condition of the rural African American in this area has changed little over the last century. But, even here, the effects of Northern migration, of the collapse of the cotton economy, of mechanization, and of mass communications have been felt. For the music is dying and dying rapidly. Scores of people are leaving Mississippi for what they hope will be a better life in Northern cities, and, in leaving, they are leaving behind the blues as sung in the Delta and developed by years of isolation, persecution, and a never-ending dependence upon the ruthless sharecropper system. Some are staying, mostly older people unwilling to desert the land under which their toils are buried. Some of these are bluesmen, but most laid down their instruments years ago. Most active bluesmen in the Delta today are middle-aged, in their forties and fifties. On Sunday afternoons, amid the booze and crap shooting, these musicians still entertain their friends who have gathered in a musty shack to hear the songs they know so well. But blues have long since lost their money-making power and their status-giving power is dwindling fast. Rarely does anyone under 40 sing country blues, the younger generation preferring rock and roll and urban-type blues.

The Musicians

The Como Drum Band is Napoleon Strickland - vocal and fife; Othar Turner - bass drum; John Tytus - snare drum. The Como Drum Band was recorded at a Labor Day barbecue behind L.P. Buford's store, the location for major social events in the area. The picnic atmosphere can be heard in the background as the penetrating notes of the fife cut through the boisterous yells of the picnickers. This is the same area in which Alan Lomax recorded Ed and Lonnie Young [1959], and this type of music, very close to the West African, has only been found in a few places in the United States. Why it has retained its popularity in this area is difficult to ascertain. Both the vocal and the fife playing on "Oh Baby" are pentatonic. However, the tonic of the vocal is one full tone higher than that of the fife. The singing is very much like that of a field holler.

Fred McDowell and his bottleneck guitar are well-known, but this is Little Johnny Woods' first appearance on records. Woods is a rambler and chronic drinker from Senatobia and an excellent harmonica accompanist. He was hard to track down but he was finally found stooped behind a car sneaking a swig from a friend's bottle of corn at one of the numerous country barbecues. McDowell and Woods, who hadn't seen each other in eight years, sat facing each other with Fred giving Woods instructions under his breath. With only a few

Left: Napoleon Strickland–fife; Othar Turner–bass drum.

Right: Peck Curtis

Left: Do-Boy Diamond

Right: Teddy Williams

Left: Robert Nighthawk; right: James "Peck" Curtis.

seconds practice before each song, the two men would let go with an artful and unique blend of guitar and harmonica.

Teddy Williams, 64, who spends most of his time sitting on a bench outside a barber shop on the main drag of the "colored section" in Canton, has played rarely in recent years. Although he and Diamond play many of the same songs, Williams performs in a rougher, rawer style.

William "Do-Boy" Diamond, 54, lives on his bossman's farm outside Canton, Miss., just north of Jackson. He is one of the more fortunate few who have jobs operating farm machinery. He did not start playing guitar until he was 25, when he learned from two local men, Wax Billbrew and Charlie Hughs. About seven years ago, he quit playing regularly because "people just worried me so for dancing, man, I got to the place I couldn't sleep none." But, occasionally, he says, "I still go'round to a dance and the dance going good and, you know, get two or three drinks of beer or two or three drinks of whiskey, and those old guitars be sounding so good and then I sit down there and play a couple of pieces myself."

Walter Miller and Dewey Corley are both from Memphis, Tenn., but it has been said that the Delta begins at the lobby of the Peabody Hotel, so they are not out of place on this record. Walter Miller is a rowdy, untidy man who takes to the bottle whenever he can, living in a room of one of the many dilapidated apartment complexes on the side roads off Beale Street. Dewey Corley, 72, blew jug with the Memphis Jug Band, and on "Fishing in the Dark" plays the washtub bass and kazoo.

Robert Diggs, 58, lives in Friars Point, an isolated town with a sluggish atmosphere in the heart of the Delta. He started blowing harmonica when he was only six years old. Diggs and his sister, both blind, traveled throughout the South in their youth playing harmonicas together. Since he has rarely been accompanied by guitar, Diggs is unusually talented in blending his harmonica and voice into one.

Tom Turner, now 66 years old, lives in Columbus in the Eastern part of the state, where blues singers are now scarce. He had not played guitar for a number of years but, with a little coaxing and a little whiskey, he tried his hand at it again. Raised near Crawford, Miss., Tom knew

"Big Joe" Williams back in 1919.

Asked for a name for the impromptu group composed of himself, James "Peck" Curtis and Robert Nighthawk, Houston Stackhouse pronounced themselves the Stackhouse Blues Rhythm Boys. Stackhouse, 58, a chunky, friendly, easygoing man, lives in Helena, Ark., about two blocks from his close friend, Peck Curtis, 56. Both men played with Sonny Boy Williamson on King Biscuit Time over radio station KFFA in Helena. Stackhouse began playing guitar, violin, mandolin and harmonica when he moved to Crystal Springs in 1927. There he became good friends with Tommy Johnson, who originally recorded "Canned Heat Blues" in 1928. Curtis, a drummer who started out on the washboard and tub in 1932, joined Sonny Boy in 1942 and was with him the night before he died in 1963. Robert Nighthawk, an accomplished singer and guitarist as record fans well know, plays only bass guitar here because he was very sick at the time from poison whiskey. He died in November, 1967 in Dundee, Miss., where these recordings were made. Stackhouse taught him how to play guitar in 1931 after Nighthawk had been blowing harmonica since 1924.

Peck Curtis' "Death of Sonny Boy" is in the tradition of recording songs on the deaths of famous blues singers by friends or admirers of the singers, such as Scrapper Blackwell for Leroy Carr, Memphis Minnie for Ma Rainey, or Walter Taylor, Rev. Emmet Dickinson, and King Solomon Hill for Blind Lemon Jefferson.

(George Mitchell – 1968,

Notes adapted from ***Blow My Blues Away*** *by George Mitchell (Originally published by Louisiana State University Press – Baton Rouge, La (1971); and now available from DeCapo Press - New York (1984)) in which many of the performers heard on these two CDs (see Arhoolie CD 402* ***Mississippi Delta Blues in the 1960s–Vol. 2*** *relate their stories and feelings in greater detail*

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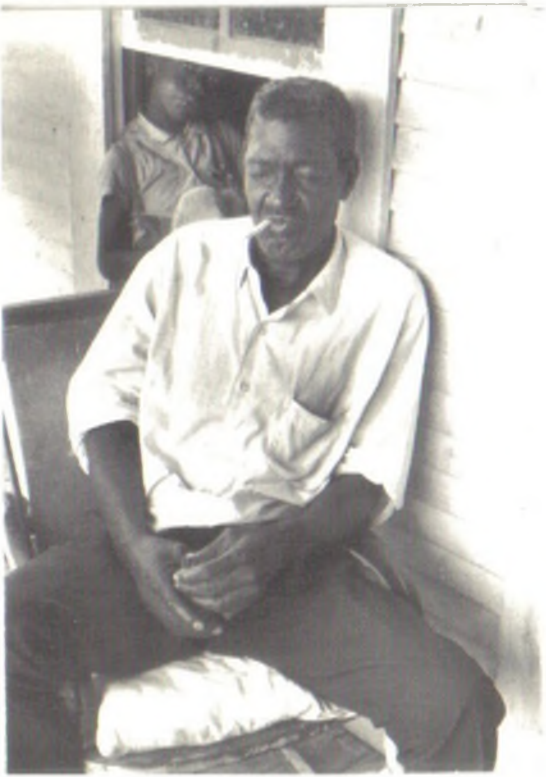

Robert Diggs

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