

The True Blues and Gospel of Backwards Sam Firk

I'm Glad Blues (1:57)
Firk -- gtr.

I'm glad now, all right. For a solid year I've felt like I didn't have anything inside me but darkness, like there was nothing to me at all except what you could see. Like little images would strike me from outside and go in through my eyes and turn upside down as they passed back into the empty fogginess. But now that you're with him, baby, and happy, I don't have to worry any more. No more worrying, wondering about who is doing what to you. I know you're all right, now. And happy, and everything. You know, you were everything to my life, and it sure hurt me to think of you being unhappy; but now I don't have to worry any more, because I'm sure you're happy and I even know right where you are. So of course I'm glad. I'm glad for you.

Almost....
Maybe....

Well, I feel so glad I think I'll compose me a blues. It will be a glad blues, naturally, since I'm glad, and I'm composing it; but I think I'll name it I'm So Glad, just so everybody will know for sure. And I'm going to play it in open E tuning, something like this here....

....probably ~~didn't~~ think Skip James, as he recorded this song for Paramount in 1931. But he played it faster....

East St. Louis Dry Land Blues (2:30)
Firk -- vcl, gtr.

They've walked all the way from East St. Louis to here--here being somewhere in the middle of Tennessee along the River. And they're still walking, and as they walk they sing this song. Quite naturally, the sun is shining down fierce, and every so often a dust-devil kicks up in the road, and the trees move around and rustle their leaves kind of dryly. The River is way down in the middle of her run, leaving big, ugly mud-covered banks running up from where she is easing along; a great, powerful thing even when she's at mid-summer low. And they're walking along steadily and easily, counting their change with their fingers in their pockets. But they know they don't need anything, because they're going to be in Memphis tomorrow or tomorrow night.

And when they get to Memphis, they're happy, so each one tells his woman: "Honey, I've walked all the way from there to here with not a thing but this old scroungy, pocket-worn dime, and that's what I've saved, just for you." And his woman says: "Aw, man, I know you're jivin' me now, you big handsome rascal, you...." And he says: "Honey, you don't think I love you?" But she says: "Well, I ain't so sure. Maybe you better show me, if you do...." And so he does, quite naturally.

And later on she says: "What's that song you're all over here whistlin'?" So he tells her it's the East St. Louis Dry Land Broke Man Walkin' Blues that he made up on his way. So she asks him what key would he play it in, on the guitar. And he says it would be regular running E, just like this ****

And they were Furry Lewis, Frank Stokes, and Jim Jackson, and I think George Torey was with them, too....

Hey Hey Hey (3:05)
Firk -- gtr.

It's a hot Saturday evening, and you're walking down a hard dirt road running along a fence and a field of corn on the top of a gentle hill, and down towards the bottom of the hill you see the woman you are on your way to meet. So you have a little time to think about it while you're on your way down there and thinking about it makes you happy, so you walk kind of fast and start singing this song:

Hey, hey ... hey, hey, baby, hey!
Hey, hey ... hey, hey, baby, hey!

When I think about you, baby, all I can say is "hey!"

And you sing it in that good, solid blues key of standard tuning E, as you stride on down the hill.

But that was Big Bill in time past. We are only left with the music and the words to his song, to use as best we can. There's a chance we can succeed in doing something he didn't even need to do: maybe we can start with the song, and recreate the image of the hill and the woman that he saw when he made the song. Maybe we can bring a breath of fresh, hot, evening air into our stale, smoky lives. With just this song....

Cigarette (1:51)
Firk -- gtr.

The words to this song (which I don't sing, you may notice) are so gross, it almost rubs off onto the music. Bo Carter made this song; and if you have listened to many old blues you will realize it would have to have been either him or Lil Johnson, or maybe one of a few other people. Bo came up with some of the grossest songs of all time. Even the themes and titles of his songs were usually like a big orange neon light saying "(censored)". But, as often, he put his words to an accompaniment of good, hot music.

Yes, yes, the old jelly-roll. I would say "Why they like to broadcast it, I don't know," except I do know, so I can't say it. I mean, why they broadcast about how much they liked to (censored), and how good they were at (censored)ing, and how big, and how tight.... The reason they like to broadcast it is so obvious that I'm not even going to mention it here. Anyway, the real question, for the moment, is not "why" but rather "how": which in Bo's case was by the use of a fairly-shiny, nickel-plated National guitar turned to open E on which he played something like this....

Candy Man Blues (3:31)
Firk -- vcl, gtr.

Lord, John! I mean you, John Hurt! You, with the angels in your fingers! (Healthy, young angels making them dance across the strings!) You little monkey-looking old man with your old brown hat pulled down over your head waiting to be taken off and danced with like a tambourine! You, you old fool, who'd not only turn your other cheek, but submit your entire being! Ah, how you played about that Candy Man! How you played about Louis Collins, and Stagger Lee, and Frankie; and about that old Sweet-Talkin' Candy Man. You'd take your old, flattened fingers and wind your guitar up from Frankie tuning into regular tuning, and then slide some of them up into an A chord while the others started to dance the Candy Man song across the strings, singing as they went....

Lordy, ladies, be careful!

You wouldn't want to get messed up with the Candy Man:

That low-down, tricky, lovable old sweet-talkin' Candy Man....

That ugly old clown of a crazy, worthless Candy Man....

That bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, nimble-fingered old sweetheart of a Candy Man....

Would you?

God preserve your merry soul, timeless man! But such a spirit would be impossible to restrain, or to kill. Its ugly little self just lives on, and dances...dances...dances....

If You Don't Want Me That Freight Train Whistle's Gonna Blow, Momma (2:12)
Firk -- gtr.

It may be nice to have a good woman and some children at your side, and a happy home; but if you do you'll never again know the joys of moving on down the road; of pulling out and watching how everything moves by, and being thrilled by how much there is! So, if you wake up one morning and find your good woman out making a 'fore-day creep, you know train time ain't long, and the railroad line is the place for you. But then again, John Hurt of the Angel Fingers said: "If you don't want me, mama, you got to have me anyhow," which is another approach to the trouble at hand. In fact, I never did believe a man, when he said he had given up on something and then said it was the most important thing in the world to him. If it was really important, he wouldn't have given up on it. You might as well give up on everything, as to give up on what's truly important to you; 'cause, after that, what's left but sounds you don't want to hear, and smells you don't want to smell, and sights you don't want to see?

So, either the freight train whistle's gonna blow, or she's gonna have you anyhow. You can think over both ways when you play this song in open E tuning.

Old Reliable One-Way Gal (3:21)
Firk -- gtr.

Thomas Hoskins -- vcl, gtr.
Stephan Michelson -- spoons

Now, here is a good song about a good woman. There ought to be a lot more songs like this, only maybe that wouldn't be realistic. Lots of people think there's no such thing as the kind of woman this song is about. Lots of blues are about the kind of gal who would only walk in the rain to say a different kind of thing to every man she met. But old Bill Moore, from Tappahannock, Virginia, had himself a good gal, and he knew it. One day when he was waiting for his next customer in the barbershop, he naturally started thinking about his good gal, and this song came into his head. He didn't have a bad word to say about her, either, and I doubt if he ever did. As far as I know they got married and had some children and all lived a happy life together until he passed away; and now they all miss him very much, and one of his sons is trying to remember and pick up on his dad's old guitar style, because he knows it has 'class', and a respectful tone that none of these other youngsters are getting out of the modern stuff they're playing. And even if he doesn't know any one-way gals his own age, he knows there is such a thing, because his pa told him so, and there's his ma to prove it. Myself, I know there is such a thing, too, and I believe I actually know one; but being a suspicious fool by nature, I have to go and sing those low-down mean blues as well as the one-way gal blues. The fact is, there is some of everything; there is one of every person, and two different one-way gals wouldn't even know each other if they passed each other in the street, but they'd still both be one-way, and a man could sing a one-way gal blues about them. But this song was made by Bill Moore for his gal, and any other one-way gal deserves to have her man write her her own one-way gal song.

Bill did his in the key of D, with his bass E string lowered from regular tuning.

Be Ready When He Comes (1:54)
Firk -- gtr.

He's coming to the world again, according to the song. Coming to judge the hearts of men; and what is He going to find in your heart? And what's He going to find in her heart or in his heart, or in 'their' hearts? For, who is 'us', and who is 'them'? What's in your heart about 'them'? What's in 'their' hearts about 'us'? Do we even hate ourselves? Oh, how can we possibly be ready when He comes? We don't have enough time. Maybe He'll give us a little more time, and we'll get everything all straightened out. Skip James sang: "...not to let Him catch you like He done before/Tippin' an' a dancin' 'cross the ball-room floor." But that was back in 1928, and now we need something more intricate and logical to consider. Or, if He would only just come, appear, really be there, and say "See, I am real, so you'd better start fixin' things up; because I may not do anything right now, but I can't say much for what I see going on here...." and then He could go away again, after we had gotten good infra-red photographs of Him, and tape recordings, and radar traces, and maybe some autographs, so we wouldn't have to rely on our memories again, and forget. And then maybe we'd get things straightened out...if that was the way it was...or is....

Old Country Dump (2:50)
Firk -- gtr.

Right outside of Magnolia, Alabama, you turn right and drive down a little paved road; soon, you turn onto a dirt road that says "Butcher's Landing--Boats/Bait." This dirt road goes snaking back through the forest, and you follow it, being careful not to scrape your car up against the dead pine branches that have fallen along the roadside. Pretty soon, you start to wonder if the road's going somewhere, or if it's just going, and then you come to a fork. One side of the fork says "Butcher's Landing--Balts/Tackle" and the other side doesn't say anything. You don't want to fish today, so you push on down the unmarked side of the fork, driving slowly, because you can't see very far ahead; the forest is thick and hot, and the road is winding around so much that you begin to wonder if you're really going anywhere, and if you're going to be able to turn around, or if you're going to have to back out for sevenhundredandninetytwo miles. But then all of a sudden, there you are.

Five old refrigerators appear. Then an old stove, over on its side: a hot, gray lizard sits on it, wondering who you are. Further on, a little hill runs down from the side of the road, strewn with torn bags of grapefruit rinds and coffee grounds, and rusty cans and beerbottles, and watermelon rinds, and boxes of old rags, and broken chair-frames, and old clothes--hampers, and old records melted by the sun, and letters from last year, and faded photographs from twenty years ago, and a bicycle frame, and car tires and truck tires. . . . You look up--away from the stale, dry smell; up past the framework of trees surrounding the clearing, into the clear, bluish-white sky. You hear crows talking among themselves somewhere, but you don't see them; you hear something a few feet away as a big blacksnake winds through the trash looking for rats; you see how the pile of rubbish runs down the hill and stops, and how there are a few old things lying farther back, in the blackness of the forest, where the green water of the swamp disappears in tangled branches and spiderwebs. . . .

You play it in regular D with your E string lowered; I promise, Bill Moore won't mind.

Get Back Old Devil (2:14)
Firk -- vcl, gtr.

You know, when evil is going on, sometimes it's hard to do right yourself. The ol' Devil is running around with his little horns sticking up, and he's getting in the middle of everything, and you want to whop him a good one up side the head. But a Man won't do that, right off; a Man will sing this song first, and tell Old Devil to take some soap and water to his ugly self, and not to think about starting any trouble because he might get more than he could handle. And then, if the Old Devil doesn't take any notice of him, a Man will haul back and whash him one-and-a-half, since he'd done the right thing by offering the Ugly One a fair warning in the key of standard E.

If you want to give him fair warning, just get into standard E and tell him all the mean things you can do, and tell him you wouldn't hold back from doing them to him if he came snooting around, dragging his tail. And I know it will keep him away, because he's pure chicken. But he's a fast one, and persistent, and if you don't look out he'll be right back in different clothes, and he'll start raising Cain! What we ought to do is take a Whole Bunch of People and get them all together and scare him off to where he isn't so interested in coming back any more. Bo Carter wrote this song to run him off, and Bo put lots of hoo-doo in it so it would work, and it does. So I think everybody ought to try it. Just get in standard E and. . . .

Poor Boy, Long Ways From Home (3:28)
Firk -- gtr.

But he's doin' all right for himself. A man can take care of himself, I don't care where he is. Even if he's a thousand miles from love and home, he can always find work and keep himself up all right. But if he's one good kind of man, there's going to be one thing to start troubling his mind after a while: they don't make gals anywhere the way they do at home, "specially like the one sweet sugar-plum who keeps flitting across his mind like a lone fly in a big room. He keeps brushing the fly away but it always comes back again in a minute. He'll keep on working at his job, and swatting at this fly, but the more he swats, the faster the fly comes back, until pretty soon it's bothering him all the time and he can't eat in the day or sleep at night. He goes out to work one day, and he's all drawn out, and the boss notices it and says: "Boy, I guess you got troubles, and I'm sorry for you, but you understand. . . ." and he lays him off. Lying awake another couple' nights, wondering what in the world he's gonna do, a little hard-time song begins hummin' in his head. He gets up and tries for another job. But he doesn't really want one, and everybody he asks can see that he doesn't so they don't give him one. He sits down on the front steps of the house where his rent is past due, and thinks to himself: "I know good and well what I really want, and I know there's nothing else to do; I know it, but I keep trying to deny it. Well, I'm finished denying it. Here's a nickel, and there's a telephone, and I'm gonna. . . ." And the rest of this song pours into his mind. He knows now that he's going to call his woman back home and ask her for money to get home on and tell her that he wants to marry her; and he's almost, almost certain that she'll say yes!

But this happened a long time ago; Barbecue Bob Hicks heard the song in Georgia, Gus Cannon heard it in Memphis, and it has gotten around as much as any other blues song. Some play it in open E, some in open G with a bottleneck. But very few people remember the man on the step who was looking at the telephone and his nickel.

West Side Blues (2:19)
Firk -- gtr.

I've seen a lot of slums. New York slums and Atlanta slums and Washington slums and Baltimore slums. But I've never seen anything as totally rank as the Chicago West Side Slum. It is a desolate slum, a cold slum, an unfriendly slum. An aura of death emanates from the rows of splotchy-painted building fronts. It creeps down the dirty cement steps, and out into the broken glass in the street; it coats everything and kills it. There is a special sky which is always a dull gray. A dead dog in the gutter decays very slowly. Rats eat at it. An occasional dead tree sticks up out of hard, grassless patches of ground which border the cracked sidewalks. Phantom-like people drift past. This deathly underworld was perhaps the spawning-place of this song.

I hesitate to say more. Do the song and the slum fit together? The song could be a cry coming from within the slum walls--a cry of frustration/resentment or perhaps some muted happiness. It's possible that Willie Harris had learned it (or made it up) in Mississippi, and had brought it up to Chicago without a name, to record it for the Brunswick record company. While he was there he stayed for a few days on the West side, which was not as deathlike in 1930 as it is now. He called the song "West Side Blues," because that was where he was staying, but he had the blues to get back to his own folks down in Mississippi. . . .

Lower your E (bottom) string to a D, and play in D.

I Be's Troubled (3:53)
Firk -- vcl, gtr.

The (too often useless) Library of Congress, in the person of one Alan Lomax, recorded the now famous McKinley Morganfield singing this song in 1940 on a plantation in Mississippi. Later, Muddy Waters played it on the Chess table under considerably less picturesque, but better-paying circumstances; the song proved to be an immediate success, and Muddy's popularity mushroomed with it. In fact, I believe this was the first song he ever recorded, either non-commercially or commercially, and each time he did it turned out very nicely even when he had an electric guitar and a bass backing him up. This is what you would call a "LowDown Blues Dance." That means it has to have enough voodoo-type rhythm to dance to. For a fact, it should have enough of that voodoo-type rhythm so you can't keep from dancing. And since you've got to play it with a bottleneck you should find one that fits nice and snug, then tune into open G and play it hot and heavy, and don't stop for anything. . . .

Thunderbird fits size thirteen,
That's too big for me;
For all the difference that makes
I'm so drunk I can't see.

As for why the Library of Congress is useless, see the rest of the accompanying notes.

Babe's Piece (2:51)
Firk -- gtr.

She lives in Doolatown. They call it Doolatown because there are lots of Dooleys living there. Doolatown mostly just stretches along the sides of the two-lane road, but there are a few houses running back up the hill, and Babe lives in one of them. When you come up the road going to her house, you stop to rest and look around because the hill is so steep it tires you; and you look up toward the house, and there she is, going back from feeding a few wandering chickens and glancing down at you. A motion catches the corner of your eye, and you see a pair of small, brown feet sticking down from behind a 1946 Dodge sedan which had been left to decay in the front driveway. You look back, and Babe is walking slowly on toward the house with her hair, walking across the washed red clay to the big gray weathered wood house propped up from the side of the hill. And you continue on up the road, and up onto her screen porch; but she's gone all the way inside, and before you can knock she says "Come on in." So you walk in through the open door and find her, with her broad, ageless face and sandy, graying hair, standing in the entrance to her kitchen, wiping her hands on a torn dishtowel.

The house is nice. It is clean and uncluttered, full of light and some comfortable furniture.

"I'm looking for a lady named Babe Reed, who plays guitar," you say.

"I'm Babe," she says, saying it like you had been all ready and waiting to meet each other for some time.

"Sit down," she says. "Come on in here, Willameena. This here's my niece Willameena."

"Hi, Willameena," you say.

"Hi," gasps Willameena, shuffling her bare feet. . . .

"Boy, I'm thirsty," you say. "I sure could enjoy a drink of good water. You feel like playing a little guitar, Babe? I've got one in the car. . . ."

And me, I sat with my sweating glass of ice-water and listened to her play this song. She said "It doesn't have no name," but she was mistaken. Standard tuning E.

Fixin' To Die (2:44)
Firk -- vcl, gtr.

"One of the more poignant blues, wouldn't you say?" asked William Frathandle, and he took a pull at his Hav-A-Tampa.

"Quite," answered his compatriot Brill Holdergeist, as he slipped a Hav-A-Tampa from the rear pocket of Mister Frathandle's gray tweeds.

"In fact," quoth Mister Frathandle, "if I were to come into consideration of playing that song myself on my own guitar, I would consider playing it in the tuning of Open G."

"Isn't that the one," queried Mister Holdergeist, "that some people refer to as Open A?"

"Even so!" astounded William Frathandle. "And furthermore, to think this song was created by Mister Booker T. W. White!"

"And to think that is to think the truth!" ranted Brill. "And to think that is the truth. And to think the truth is to think that it was recorded by him on one of those old Vocalion records, back in 1940."

"Bukka certainly had a touch," reminisced Will.

"You would know?" appalled Mister Brill Holdergeist.

"I mean, fool, the way he bore down on it and took his time and played it right and didn't miss a note and played it like train time wasn't long and he had a ramblin' mind, and pulled it along like six white horses pullin' him along to his lonesome grave and made it whine like a church-bell tone and swung it on around through the low-lands in the cool of the evening and brought it all up to rest in front of his sweet mama's door," said Mister Frathandle dreamily as he toyed with his mint julep.

"And to think," said Brill Holdergeist, "that he did it all with the neck of a bottle slipped on his pinky. . . ."

"Surely you don't mean his 'pinkie,'" corrected Will. "That must have been a slip of the tongue on your part."

"My part be damned. His little finger anyway," grumbled Brill, and he lunged away to fix himself a big, tall, cool mint julep.

It has been a big question, but I'm not asking it here. I'm not really answering it, either. I'm just playing my song about the Unbroken Circle. Because there are plenty of circles which won't be unbroken by and bye, and I guess there are some that surely will be unbroken, too. I know at least one circle that will be unbroken, and in fact, it is unbroken right now; and that is the one this song is about. It is a circle of unharnessed energy: energy in thoughts, energy in unsung bird songs, energy in unwalked walks up mountainsides, energy in unreleased love--the energy will never all be used, and yet it is all usable. It is in the air, in the sky, and in thoughts of tomorrow. The energy of possibilities--even if the universe fell apart, think of the remaining possibilities--possibilities aren't even diminished by their transpiring, since possibilities are unlimited. The circle is unbroken, the circle of life, love, and death; unbroken because of a constant reserve of fuel, the energy which keeps it turning, and together.

Even though Roebuck Staples asked: "Will the circle be unbroken...?" I think he must have believed it would be, judging from the way he and his family sang the song. My song just goes round and round in the key of open E, and I think it will still be going, somewhere, through all eternity. I just made it audible for one minute and fifty-nine seconds, that's all.

What We Might Call A Few Notes About the Blues

The blues seems to be dead, sometimes, but it isn't really; it's just been buried alive by the overpowering noise of a war-weary age... today the "blues" appears to have turned into the "angrily," the "neurotics," and even the "mads." The story might go like this (or it might not.)

The original blues looked at only a very local problem, but looked at it in such a way as to find in it a significance so basic as to be universal; and expressed it so bluntly as to be unavoidable. It has become increasingly hard for a person to look so carefully and as long at a problem, or happening, so local; problems are increasing both in quantity and encroachment, and thus the ability to be able to make a succinct statement concerning these problems becomes a more and more illusive undertaking.

Don't get the idea that a blues singer was necessarily a poor man by definition; there were, indeed, those who recorded from the cottonfields and never made enough money from their recordings to buy a fifth of good whiskey; and there were those who dropped into a recording studio one afternoon, convinced the owner of their prowess, recorded a set of songs, took their ten dollars and bought a train ticket home, without leaving any indication behind them of where "home" was. But Tampa Red had a lot of money at one time, and Big Bill was fairly rolling in it for a while, not to mention Sonny Boy Williamson, Roosevelt Sykes, and several post-war blues singers. These were some of the people who really 'sold' their blues (and after a while had it sold for them.) It seems like the biggest selling point was voice or lyrics--and not accompaniment or musical genre.

The story of blues recording during the 1925-1944 era is both depressing and irreversible. Some recording companies were producing records of fine technical quality as early as 1927, yet some of the best artists are practically inaudible on their 1935 recordings. Blind Willie Johnson's records were of high technical quality right through his career, but Blind Lemon Jefferson is represented by only one record of nearly-high quality; and only two sides, from the eight which were nearly well-recorded, were issued. Then there are all the excellent artists who only recorded (for various reasons) one or two records: George Torey, Henry Spaulding, Marshall Owens, Bobby Grant and Jesse Thomas. However, most of the masters for these records were destroyed, right along with those of the more popular singers, when the depression and bankruptcy brought an end to many small record companies. Fortunately, the Library of Congress also recorded a lot of blues, but even these recordings are beginning to rot and disintegrate in their vaults, which is a shame, because they don't have anybody to take care of them and they won't let anybody hear them. It seems that the major interests of those who have control over the L of C recordings are not in the blues field, and it seems reasonable to think that the L of C policymakers wouldn't know what blues records were if asked. Yes, it seems... indeed... (choke)... unfortunate....

Why is it that a handful of very excited people spend the majority of their time in a relentless search for original copies of even the worst-recorded old blues records? Partly because they are worth a lot, and there is a game going around which causes their value to increase by leaps and bounds. But they are also driven by a more subtle reason, in some cases at least; this reason might be defined as something like the difference between pre-war and post-war blues--the subtle difference, not the electrified difference. It is quite indefinable... one might suggest that pre-war blues often embodied a revelation, whereas post-war blues often seemed (seems) to embody a complaint. Pre-war blues was often absolutely joyful, whereas most post-war blues seem rather mournful; some might say, more soulful, but I believe it was only a change in soul.

The blues is a unique and "valid" enough musical idiom that it more than merits further study and serious playing. But first of all, it must be better understood--which means REALLY HEARD. REALLY HEARING blues involves three things; you must listen to recordings from the 1928-1935 period, the recordings must be in excellent condition, and you must REALLY LISTEN until you either believe you have heard all the music on the record or believe it would be impossible to hear it all. In order to fulfill these requirements, you should equip yourself with a hi-fi set with a good speaker, then buy re-issue LP's: Yazoo, Arhoolie, Origin Jazz Library, Victor Vintage series, European imports. If you drink at all, relax with a beer in front of the speaker. If you don't drink at all, just listen. Later, somehow, you should manage to run into a collector who has original 78's and listen to them the same way. Listening!

Blues can be rough and noisy, or they can be clear and cool; they can be nearly classical sounding, or they can sound as earthy as Saturday night in an Atlanta slum. The idiom seems infinite in scope, and the only general rule that seems to be applicable to it is....

--Mike Stewart

One day back when I was ignorant, I was sittin' on my tumble-down-room backwards country shack porch playin' one of those old soulful Negro folk songs... anyway, here comes this white man whose name I knew at once to be Milton Garfinklesteinberghold.

"What is the meaning of the blues?" he asked, as I spat absentmindedly on his shoe.

"Which blues," I said, uppity-like, as he fumbled with his tape recorder and camera and briefcase and other instruments of death.

"Oh, any blues," he said, while I looked piercingly over his left shoulder into the middle distance. "John Henry, like...."

"I don't know no John Henry," I declared.

"Well," he said, "how about Cypress Grove Blues, then... or... My Good Man Has the Blues?"

"I don't know 'bout no Cypress Grove, neither I ain't studd'n' 'bout no good man," I said. "What you think I'm is...?"

"You do play the blues, don't you?" he asked, trying to hide a look of astonishment.

"Blues..." I mused, my dim old eyes and hoary head bowed toward the ground, "the Devil's Music. HOT DAMN I usded to could play the blues back before I got religion. Blues...."

"Well, tell me, Sam...."

"MISTER FIRK to you," I interrupted, in my finest voice. "And with pleasure, if you please!"

"Tell me uh Mister Firk, what I really want to know, so that I can tell the rest of the world--uh, what I have been seeking all my rich and troubled life... indeed, the one thing I desire to understand beyond all else--the knowledge of which I consider all-important."

"Whatteryou askin'," I said, "anything?"

"Sir," he says careful like, "what is the meaning of the blues?"

"Who blues?" I said, pulling a splinter off the porch to pick my teeth.

"THE BLUES, damnit to hell and gone!" he almost shouted.

"Well, brother," I exclaimed in my worst voice, "so you one of us after all. Words of violence. Anger. Capable of love sure's you're born. Mean talkin' now means sweet-talkin' later. I'll tell you about the blues; throw that machine away you want to see the blues. Do things you know better than, the blues'll come tippin' to your door. Let your hands and feet rest and your mind roll on, pretty soon ol' blues'll come rollin' through your brain. Watch something die. Watch something live. Here come the blues sure as pigshit. And I'll tell you what, man: watch a real woman, I don't care what she's doing. Watch her, and old blues clobber you on the head with a back fence picket. And do somebody ask you Mister Gar-fink-le-stein-berg-thold, what the blues is? what you gonna say?"

"I'm gonna pray," he said, fumbling for his car keys with trembling hands.

--B. Sam Firk



The War of The Roses

Backwards Sam Firk is invisible, has accepted an anonymity usually not enjoyed by embryo folk heroes, and carries his songs not in his heart but on paper for he is an artiste, improviser, dream flier: will be forever and was for all time sitting, immobile beneath the Bo of his forebears in silent repose, confident as always of the next sun, of the wheel; his mantle a mandala of lucrative allusions carefully calculated to bring a warm understanding of the "death" that lives in the music we call blues. Very simply, the figures Firk emulates were removed from his own possible choices of life-styles: they could have done crime, and been a thief; they could have done religion and been a "preacher"; they could have done agriculture, and picked cotton--or they could have done the Blues Racket, and been a bluesman. But "the Blues" to Firk, was not considered to be a profession. He began as a musician. He could not have learned to play any other way. Where the music of the early 20th century bluesman was his only alternative to death, Firk's music is forced out of devotion. The solutions are different but the problem remains the same: we all live near death, and the vision of our mortal proximity is impossible to deal with directly. The fact is so simple it is unavoidable. The wind, I remind you, blows out of the east. The East.

Beside Firk sits Green Flowerstall, fixing his Nagra with an axe, just as anonymous as Firk but not as intent or heroic, passively avoiding the shade of the charred Bo tree as he glances from the ruin in his lap to Firk's hands, which rest across a machine gun.

Green is a paper punch, lining up the holes so the pages will fit into the book. About his holy knees in the green grass lie red flashlight cells for the Nagra. The ineluctable extension of intimidation is greatness, part of the package of persistence. He sits beside the Master, a curio in the forests of his country, among the figures of that deceptive shadowland, obscure and grandioso. Of his business practices, Rima le Morte once said: "That is a man who once paid five thousand dollars for a PanAm flight bag full of Hershey Bars." Impossible--we must look at the whole picture: if anyone can fix anything with an axe, it will be Green, and no one will ever know how he fixed it. On the eve of World War Three's Umpteenth False Start, he dropped his underpants in the middle of Eighth Avenue at the height of rush hour. Green must share Firk's anonymity as long as he wishes to transmit Firk's music; for he is the perfect (only available) medium, through which passes exceptional gems of sound, absolutely flat. His presence is so linear it produces out of generally benign environments, contingencies of nightmarelike genre, a synthetic stable of modeled dreams, which are calculated to darken theonomic banality, only to replace it with an entirely subjective umbra, to limit and enoble the archaic, the saint. Green and Sam watch Chris out there in the meadow chasing some butterflues in the dwindling sunlight. Death to him is a figure of speech, a way of making money obsolete.

Other figures move covertly behind the patient pair. The great Fang and Nicholas Beade converse in robes of wool, beside the eternal spring of Marion, recounting the resurrection of Yazoo, and the setting of the sun in the West. Engaged in ultimate tasks, their gestures are obscure and their speech, although perfectly plain, seems desultory. They are the seers of the cult, the leaders of the blind, of the people: men of the word. Their expressions, when observable, are dark and portentous; they speak of toy locomotives and trucks and Picasso, of the bars at Lerno and Cathay, of the Sargasso Sea, of tides and the moon, of Floating Basement Enterprises.

The outline of a combat soldier moves across the sky behind them, beyond the springrun, where the shack is. The soldier wears a beard and smokes a cornucob pipe. He watches over the platen of his soul whilst wordless papers fly catycorned past empty bottles of cough medicine and scatter among the figures about the tree.

Green turns patiently to Beade and mentions the sun; Beade nods cautiously, with a dignified bow, as old as History, and smiling, hums a bar of Webern, eyes glistening in triumph.

You hear it before you see it: a toy locomotive--pulling thirty toy boxcars on an oval track which runs about the perimeter of the hill, past a 1/30 scale flower mill--making a sound somewhere between a dog chewing a wet tennis ball and breaking glass. It symbolizes reincarnation. Lemuel Forkworth holds the wires to the toy train between his teeth. The wires emit a dull ruby glow. Forkworth is the point of change, a point about which revolves a magnificent plaything in ceaseless passage, clattering softly, its profound yet almost inaudible rattle heard only in the lulls of conversation on the hill. A couple in black felt hats and black suit and dress wearing white carnations at the lapel, lounge on a great brown effigy of Pooh, dreaming of the kingdom they cannot ever hope to understand but can define perfectly well. They are at once a shadow of Columbia and scions of the great Midwestern desert. They smile in the thin blue light as the group as it continues to prepare for worship. Forkworth, the schoolmaster, turns to Fang, and reminds him of how it all used to be.

In the meadow below, with the Delta stretching away below him, stands Blind Christopher Bach, follower of Proteus. In the mist by a highway stand two men in conversation with his camera operator; first the New England scribe makes hazy and complex overtures in the air with curlicues and ornaments and cherubs with redwings and paddlewheels as she listens patiently without saying an unnecessary word. Now the guitar salesman from San Francisco interrupts the scribe with little gnashing fangs of epithets, but soon he also subsides in wonderment at the perfect placidity and grace of the girl. She turns and stalks with hands clasped behind her and head down, squinting over the tops of purple glasses as the light meter swings in slow repetitive arcs before her. She walks to the place where Queen Kay sits by the path on the western side of the hill, polishing golf clubs. "Ho," she says. "Ho yourself," says Kay. "Two men from Ely," she says toying with the light meter, "have come to return the legendary grail of Being to its former resting place; they want to talk to Green." "It shall be accomplished," murmurs Kay in a distracted voice.

It is later in the afternoon before the audience is granted with Firk and Flowerstall. The little tree is bare, having shed its leaves at noon, and a slight wind has picked up, tossing things about the hilltop in a careless sort of way. Green struggles with the last battery as an empty cough medicine bottle tumbles by like a sagebrush. Firk is peering from under the palm of his hand at four figures winding their way up the path. Every now and then one of them is blown over. Usually the one carrying the large cloth sack. Stephen, leaning against a rock, sees the four pass the last stop sign, and starts a stopwatch. "I'm really versatile," winks Green to Firk who turns down the corners of his mouth. "I am ready, and have been for hours," snaps Firk.

Green rises and waves to the people coming up the path. Blind Christopher waves back. The Saffron-clad princess pours Robitussin AC on Fang's head. A clap of thunder. The two men continue up the path alone, buttoning their suits and straightening their polkadot ties. The one on the left, with the bag, gets blown down again just short of speaking distance. Lemuel's train goes clattering by under his feet but he does not heed the warning. The scribe takes the bag, helps his friend the guitar salesman to stand, and leads him in a friendly sort of way to a telephone booth nearby. Suddenly Stephen cries out from under his beard: "Into The Booth, Both of You!" delivering the lines with such force and conviction that the two men cannot but oblige him. "Now Pick Up the Phone," commands Stephen. The scribe lifts the receiver and instead of a dial tone, hears strange distorted guitar music. A wave of Paranoia rushes through the men in the phone booth. Outside, the wind howls madly. It is getting late.

Through the wind between the curling flower spaces Blind Christopher Bach crouches with his ear pressed to the magazine of his eclair, grinning as he squints, stepping sideways with a careful, controlled momentum from a position beside Firk towards the rear to include the phone booth and Firk's back, so looking over Firk's shoulder as he stands and takes aim with the machine gun, it is possible to see the phone booth the machine gun and Firk all at the same time. Green points a four foot soundspot microphone at WindyBox, the camera assistant, who stands between Firk and the telephone booth, holding a scene-card. Chris waves with his free hand and she runs to the left dropping the card as the booth dissolves outward in all directions in a shower of grit, glass, and pink spray; the whine of ricocheting bullets becomes a shrill drone above the steady roar of Firk's automatic weapon. The aluminum frame has folded back upon itself by the time the clip is exhausted and the silence is surprising; the wind is gone and the light that was once blue begins a shift to yellow-green. Bach, putting down the camera, walks with Firk over to where Flowerstall is surveying the pile of metal and glass down the hill, as he rocks slowly back and forth holding the mic crosswise like a jousting stick. "Green," says Firk, "that was terrible; do you think you could save it with a little editing?" "Impossible," replies Flowerstall, "we recorded the track on a Presto 1-Y because you wanted the album to sound like an old 78. We'll just have to do it over again."

WindyBox, standing nearby, notices the batteries have popped out of the back of the Nagra again and very slowly begins to pick them up, as if she had done nothing but gather batteries for two thousand years.

--Willum de Hartgarden



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