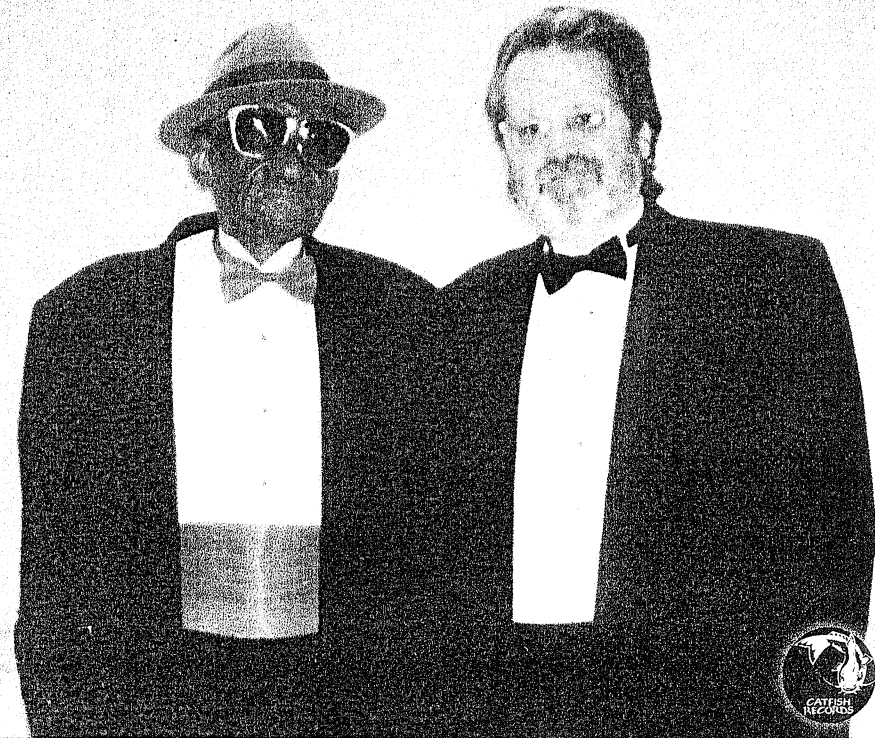


CATFISH, CARP & DIAMONDS

~ 35 YEARS OF TEXAS BLUES ~



Tary's Catfish, Carp & Diamonds Liner Notes November 8, 1999

The songs on this special limited edition disc are some of my personal favorites from recording African American music since 1964. Many have never been commercially released.

When I was 10 years old, Chuck Berry's "Maybeline" struck me like a bolt of lightning. That began a lifelong adventure and obsession. By the time I was in high school in Port Arthur, Texas, in the late '50s I was seriously taken by the blues. By the early '60s in Austin my obsession had become early blues roots--Texas bluesmen--Leadbelly, Blind Lemon, Lightnin' Hopkins and especially Mance Lipscomb, whom I heard play at the University of Texas. I met this wonderful, charming, brilliant gentleman; we immediately became close friends and my life was forever changed.

I have been blessed by beautiful relationships with older men who like grandfathers taught me about music, but more importantly, about life and how to live with dignity, honor and grace. Some of these lessons took many years to absorb; my self-destructive impulses caused horrible pain, distress and damage to those I loved, to those who trusted me and to myself. Eventually I learned their teachings and was able to find the grace to repair much of the damage done, but it is still a daily struggle. Some of the men who kindly mentored me in the lessons of life and opened the doors to their seminal music have been Mance Lipscomb, Kenneth Threadgill, Bill Nealey, Dr. Americo Paredes, Rev. Lavada Durst, Robert Shaw and Roosevelt T. Williams, "The Grey Ghost." There are many others, but I regard these men as my grandfathers.

As I was learning to play guitar and sing at Kenneth Threadgill's bar, I enrolled in the University of Texas and in 1963 took my first folklore class from Dr. Americo Paredes, which began a lifelong pathway. A year later in another folklore class Dr. Paredes encouraged me to apply for a Lomax Fellowship to record the regional music of Texas. He helped me gain that fellowship and in 1964 I bought a Roberts portable tape recorder and a good quality AKG microphone; the university supplied me with tape. I began learning how to record and to document my recordings close to home with Robert Shaw, the great barrelhouse pianist who owned a grocery store and bar-b-que on Manor Road in Austin. Mr. Shaw kindly indulged me and led me to many other players, the most striking being Roosevelt Thomas Williams. I didn't know it then but my recordings of the Grey Ghost in 1965 began an incredible relationship that lasted until he died in 1996 and still resonates as the most important musical adventure of my life.

In 1965 armed with the John Lomax grant and letters from Dr. Paredes, Dr. Roger Abrahams and Gov. John Connally, I recorded over 60 tapes of the music of Texans--blues, cowboy songs, toasts, fiddle music, jazz, prison folklore, Mexican conjunto music and other folklore. Much of the music on this disc is from those recordings. The original tapes are in the Center for American History at the University of Texas. Dr. Paredes arranged that I would retain the commercial rights for these recordings and that the university would be the repository for the original tapes. The reel-to-reel tapes have been transferred to digital audiotape (DAT), digitally enhanced and then transferred to disc by the extraordinarily talented studio engineer Stuart Sullivan.

Encouraged by a Barker Texas History Museum exhibit on blues called "From Lemon to Lightnin'," which featured my recordings and especially those of Grey Ghost, in 1986 I began again to work with him and other players. The following year I used the 1965 recordings of him to found Catfish Records and coproduced with Martha Hartzog and Paul Congo the video documentary *Texas Blues Reunion* featuring T.D. Bell and Erbie Bowser.

In 1989 I recorded Grey Ghost, Rev. Lavada Durst--a.k.a. Dr. Hepcat--and Erbie Bowser; this became *Texas Piano Professors* (Catfish 1002). I began studio recording in 1991 with partners Ed Gwinn, owner of GEM/Lonestar Studio, and writer/producer Jon Foose. Our first project was T.D. Bell and Erbie Bowser, followed by Grey Ghost with a full band. The Bell and Bowser recording was first issued on cassette locally and then was licensed to the Dutch label Black Magic Records. In 1992 we made our first recordings of Long John Hunter and also recorded Snuff Johnson; these recordings were also licensed to Black Magic Records. Later that year the Grey Ghost studio album, T.D. Bell and Erbie Bowser's *It's About Time* and Long John Hunter's *Ride With Me* were released on Spindletop Records, which immediately went out of business, but their careers had been jump-started and they all have had success traveling to Europe, Canada and around the United States, including Carnegie Hall.

We subsequently produced two Long John Hunter CDs for Alligator Records, *Bordertown Legend* and *Swinging from the Rafter*, and in 1995 recorded Frank Robinson and Guitar Curtis Colter from Crockett for Black Magic Records. Alligator released Long John Hunter's *Ride With Me* in 1998, and in 1999 we returned to the studio for Alligator, coproducing with owner Bruce Iglauer *Lone Star Shoot-Out*, which reunited Long John with Lonnie Brooks, Phillip Walker and Ervin Charles. All four had started playing in the Beaumont-Port Arthur area in the early 1950s, so it was like a family reunion for them. The recording has been very successful for them and they have been touring together.

Along the way we have been twice nominated for W.C. Handy Awards and have received excellent reviews. As you can see, it has been quite a ride.

NOTES ON THE SONGS and THE PLAYERS

- 1. Way Out on The Desert - Grey Ghost** (Williams; Cane Pole Music BMI)
Recorded at GEM/Lonestar Studio in 1991 with the incomparable George Raines playing drums. Ghost first recorded this tune in 1965 and it is on his Catfish recording. It is classic Texas barrelhouse style similar to "The Cows," a barrelhouse standard.
- 2. Write My Mama One More Letter - Dave Tippen with Group** (traditional; public domain)
When I recorded Mr. Tippen at the Wynne Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections in 1965 he was 70 years old and had been continuously in prison for burglary since the 1930s. Mr. Tippen had served time with Leadbelly in the 1930s but unlike Leadbelly was never released, even though he had no history of violence. Texas and southern prisons were notorious for their horrid, brutal conditions, and this song, which still brings tears to my eyes, is Tippen's personal statement of his plight. He was one of the most moving singers I have ever heard. The singers in the background sang regularly with Tippen and I recorded several of their songs, which I hope someday to release as part of a prison song album.
- 3. Stewball - Ebbie Veasley with Group** (traditional; public domain)
Ebbie Veasley was the other lead singer in the same group of inmates at Wynne Unit that included Dave Tippen. The story of Stewball the English racehorse has been told in many variations; in this prison version there are lyrics that go back to slavery times. Since prison work was essentially slavery, it is not surprising that these verses were preserved in prison worksongs. That this continued into the 1960s is one of the many horrors of the brutality and racism of Texas history.

4. **The Titanic - Ebbie Veasley** (traditional; public domain)
African American men have long told "toasts," rhymed, usually obscene narrative poems, to entertain each other. Toasts are an African tradition preserved today as "rap." They are the last remaining form of the oral tradition of narrative poetry in the English language. That the tradition was preserved in prison, where there were few other opportunities for entertainment, is not surprising. The Titanic had no African American passengers and had declined passage to world heavyweight champion boxer Jack Johnson; the captain allegedly said, "I'm not carrying any coal." The story of "Shine," who worked in the boiler room of the ship and was the only African American on board, is a beautiful revenge against racism. Needless to say "The Titanic" was a favorite toast for over 50 years after the ship sank.

5. **The Signifyin' Monkey - Ebbie Veasley** (traditional; public domain).
Another very popular toast in the African tradition of animal tales. The trickster monkey who foals the lion is akin to "Br'er Rabbit," but this is an urban trickster with sharp shoes and "gassed" hair--a "pimpin' motherfucker." As you can see, rap has old old roots.

6. **Jack of Diamonds Is a Hard Card to Play - Tommy Wright** (traditional; public domain)
Blues was first played on fiddle, not guitar or piano, and this is a fine example of very early Texas blues; it was in the repertoire of most Texas bluesmen. Tommy Wright was from Luling, Texas, and was the youngest member of a family band that was very popular from the 1920s to the 1950s. By the time I found him in 1965 all his brothers and sisters had died, unfortunately without ever having been recorded. Tommy Wright was a very accomplished musician whose repertoire included blues, country music, Western swing and even pop tunes like Cindy Walker's "Across the Alley from the Alamo." He was 60 years old when I recorded him and he died in 1984. I hope to release a CD of Texas blues fiddle that would include Tommy Wright, Teodar Jackson and "Preacher" Nelson of Cameron, Texas.

7. **May the Circle Be Unbroken - Alfred "Snuff" Johnson** (traditional; public domain)
This well known tune is from the Black Magic CD of the same title. It features Kim Wilson of the Fabulous Thunderbirds on harmonica and George Raines on drums and was recorded at GEM/Lonestar in 1989. A strong man with a strong voice, Mr. Johnson was known as a "black cowboy" as well as a bluesman. In the 1940s and '50s he played in a string band with Teodar Jackson, but they never recorded together. In the mid-1990s he toured Europe with folklorist Alex Govanar, emphasizing his cowboy roots. Born in 1914 in Cedar Valley near Austin, he still lives in Austin but is in poor health and no longer plays.

8. **Let the Church Roll On - Eugene Grigsby and Group 1965** (traditional; public domain)
A beautifully performed comedic take on gospel by a younger group of inmates at the Wynne Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections. This immensely talented group performed often in church, at inmate functions, for visiting dignitaries and for the annual prison rodeo. They were so skilled that their only prison jobs were to sing, much sought-after positions.

9. **Stand By Me - James Thomas and Group** (King, Leiber, Stoller, Leiber; Stoller Music, BMI)
From the same group of inmates who sang "Let the Church Roll On" (they had 4 lead singers), this magnificent vocalizing is my favorite version of this great doo-wop standard. James Thomas is, for me, every bit as talented as Ben E. King or Aaron Neville. I have not been able to find out whatever became of him. He was about 21 or 22 years old in 1965.

10. **The Jives of Dr. Hepcat - Rev. Lavada Durst, "Dr. Hepcat"** (Durst; Cane Pole Music, BMI)
Dr. Hepcat was the first African American D.J. in the South, for Austin's KVET in 1947, and developed his "jive" talk while announcing Negro League baseball games. John Connally, then an owner of KVET, heard Durst's jive when Jackie Robinson came to Austin and was impressed enough to give him a regular show on the station. Durst's show, "The Rosewood Ramble," introduced thousands of Central Texans to rhythm and blues, jazz and his wonderful jive talk. He was on the air for 17 years. As a musician he began playing piano at house rent parties and developed his style listening to Robert Shaw. After marrying he had a religious conversion and became a Baptist minister but retained his hip attitude, preaching in church with dark sunglasses on and often rhyming his sermons. He returned to music after his pastor told him that his music was a gift from God that he must share. This piece, which he improvised, describes his radio career and was recorded in 1989 for *Texas Piano Professors*. It is a delight. His work is now part of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Rev. Durst died in 1996.

11. **Watchin' Every Devil - Grey Ghost** (Williams; Cane Pole Music, BMI)
Also from *Texas Piano Professors*, this is the Ghost at his best as a singer, writer and pianist. Folklorist William A. Owens recorded him doing this piece in 1940 in Navasota, where he found him playing at a skating rink. He was so impressed that he recorded 2 sessions, one in Navasota and the other in Smithville. In his book *Tell Me A Story, Sing Me A Song* (UT Press, 1983), Owens dedicates nearly a whole chapter to his adventures with the Ghost, whom he describes as a "true folk poet." During these same sessions historian/radio commentator Allistair Cooke was playing Ghost's recording of "The Hitler Blues" for British troops fighting Hitler, and *Time* dedicated an article to Ghost and the song. Because of the war there was a shortage of vinyl, so no new artists were being recorded commercially. Ghost waited nearly 50 years to be recorded again. This song, to me, compares favorably with the best of Robert Johnson or any other blues writer.

12. **Tom Moore Blues - Mance Lipscomb** (Lipscomb; Tradition Music, BMI)
This is probably the best known blues to come out of rural Texas. Tom Moore and his 3 brothers ran an infamous plantation between the Brazos and Navasota rivers that used parolees for labor. Moore was notorious for his murderous and cruel treatment of his workers. The lyrics of this song are pure folklore, made up by the workers and sung in the fields when Moore wasn't around. Mance set it to music. Lightnin' Hopkins recorded it as the *Tim Moore Blues*, hoping to avoid the wrath of Tom Moore. When Mance first recorded it for Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records and Mack McCormick, he did so anonymously, still fearing the Moores with good reason; when I recorded him in 1965 he still did not want it released under his name. The Moore farm still operates; today the workers are Central Americans. Local African Americans still won't go there. Much has changed in Navasota--the mayor is an African American--but the horrors are still remembered, and most of the local whites are still racist.

13. **See That My Grave Is Kept Clean - Frank Robinson** (Jefferson; public domain)
Frank Robinson of Crockett gives a hair-raising treatment of Blind Lemon Jefferson's best known song, recorded in Austin at GEM/Lonestar in 1995 and released on *Deep East Texas Blues* (Black Magic Records). Mike Buck is the drummer. Mr. Robinson is a nephew of Lightnin' Hopkins and was also mentored by Frankie Lee Sims. He is a Texas treasure who prefers to play the old blues and deserves much wider attention.

14. Navasota Blues - "Guitar" Curtis Colter (Colter; Cane Pole Music, BMI)

Albert Collins Curtis Colter was also from Crockett and learned to play from Frank Robinson. A much younger man (born in 1942), Colter played hard-edged modern blues in the tradition of Freddie King. He constantly talked about his woman in Navasota and wrote this tune for her. Tragically, he was killed in a car wreck returning from Navasota the same day we finished mixing *Deep East Texas Blues*, which features both him and Frank Robinson. The backing musicians are Mike Buck on drums, Tary Owens on bass, Joe Kelly on rhythm guitar and Kaz Kazanoff on saxophone.

15. 24 Hours a Day - T.D. Bell (D. Jarett; Jarett Music; BMI)

Tyler D. Bell was born in Lee County, Texas, in 1929 and grew up in Rockdale, where his mother owned a juke joint. He learned to play guitar in the 1940s and was strongly influenced by T-Bone Walker. Around 1949 Johnny Holmes, owner of the Victory Grill, convinced Bell to come play for him in Austin, where he very soon became the top blues guitarist, influencing young players like Blues Boy Hubbard and W.C. Clark. He teamed up with pianist Erbie Bowser in the early 1950s, beginning a lifelong partnership. When the blues scene in east Austin dried up in the 1970s, he retired from music and ran a trucking business. I was able to coax him out of retirement for the Texas Blues Reunion at the Victory Grill in 1987, and he and Erbie began a new career that included a 10 year resident gig Fridays at Austin's Continental Club. Their high point was a showcase at Carnegie Hall. We recorded T.D. and Erbie with a big band in 1991, released on Black Magic Records as *It's About Time* and on the ill-fated Spindletop Records a year later. This tune features T.D.'s smooth vocals and biting guitar and the jumping piano of Erbie Bowser. The backing musicians are George Raines on drums, Sarah Brown on bass, Mel Davis on harmonica and Kaz Kazanoff and Jon Smith on saxophones. T.D. Bell died of cancer in 1998.

16. Erbie's Bounce - Erbie Bowser (Bowser; Cane Pole Music, BMI)

Erbie Bowser was born in 1918 in Davilla, Texas, and began playing piano as a child. By high school he was touring with the Sunset Royal Entertainers, and teaming up with T.D. Bell he played a circuit from Corpus Christi to New Mexico. He first recorded this signature piece as solo piano on *Texas Piano Professors*; this version with big band backing was recorded in 1991. Erbie was well known among pianists for his strident percussive style, with a strong left hand and inventive soloing; many considered him the best modern blues pianist. "Erbie's Bounce" was and is often played by other pianists, such as Floyd Domino and Johnny Nicholas; Erbie was very influential for many younger players. He and T.D. Bell took their show to Blues Estafete in Utrecht, Holland, twice, to Wolf Trap festival and to Carnegie Hall. He said that he and T.D. were like twins--always anticipating the other's next move--and indeed their dueting was unparalleled in modern blues. Erbie Bowser died of heart failure in 1996; his wide grin and exuberant demeanor are sorely missed.

17. You're Nobody 'til Somebody Loves You - Grey Ghost

(Cavanaugh, Morgan, Stock, Shapiro & Bernstein; Southern Music, ASCAP)
This was Grey Ghost's favorite song, played as his theme song for over 70 years. First recorded in 1965, it was released as Catfish 1001 in 1987; this 1991 version, released on Spindletop Records, was recorded when he was 89. It features George Raines on drums, Danny Barnes on National Resonator guitar, Herb Hall on clarinet, Sebastian Campesi on violin and Randy Zimmerman on trombone. Ghost had an incredible life, with careers as a gambler,

whiskey maker, chauffeur, ladies man and school bus driver as well as a musician, overcoming horrible racism and poverty. When he was 12 years old in Taylor, Texas, he burned down the local whorehouse because the whores insulted his mother and sisters. He was the first black man in West Texas to own a car, a baby blue Packard convertible. When his Catfish recording was released in 1987, at age 84 he embarked on a journey that brought him international acclaim, including an honorary doctorate in music. He played every Wednesday at the Continental Club until his 92nd birthday. He also played the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Chicago Folk Festival, the National Black Arts Festival and "CBS Sunday Morning," and when he died in 1996 he was honored throughout the world. I can't think of a better way to end this CD. Enjoy! - *Tary Owens*



Mance Lipscomb & Tary Owens 1965

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1. Way out on the Desert
2. Write My Name One More Letter
3. Sawball
4. The Titanic
5. The Siggiflyin' Monkey
6. Jack of Diamonds Is a Hard Card to Play
7. May the Circle Be Unbroken
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