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FURRY LEWIS

Edited by
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Photo by A. R. Danberg

FURRY LEWIS

The last time I saw Furry Lewis he was chopping weeds on a highway embankment near the outskirts of Memphis, Tennessee, the town he has lived in since he was six years old. He was wearing faded denim overalls, a khaki work shirt, a bright red handkerchief tied around his neck. It was a hot day, and his sweat soaked shirt clung to his back. He was chopping at the heavy plants with a hoe, stopping every now and then to wipe off his face. Furry has worked as a laborer for the city of Memphis for nearly thirty-five years. He chops weeds, cuts grass, rakes leaves, picks up trash, whatever needs done around the city's streets and parks. He limps a little, but watching him work it's still a surprise to notice that he has only one leg. He lost the left leg in a railroad accident in 1917 and he's worn an artificial limb ever since. His hair is gray, his body is thin and bent, his face is lined, but in many ways he is still a young man. He was wearing a shapeless, tan felt hat, the brim turned up all around and there was a note painfully lettered on the front with a pencil, "KID FURRY - Have Gun, Will Travel".

Will Shade, the guitar and harmonica player who had organized the "Memphis Jug Band" for Victor Records in 1927, had remembered Furry in a conversation in February, 1959. Will and I were sitting in his room, passing the bright winter afternoon talking about the blues and about older blues singers. I looked out of the window, over the roofs toward Beale Street, and said to him, thinking out loud as much as anything, "I certainly would like to have heard some of those old singers, Jim Jackson, Furry Lewis, John Estes, Frank Stokes. . ."

Will leaned out of his chair and called to his wife, Jennie Mae, who was working in the kitchen.

"Jennie Mae, when was the last time you saw that fellow they call 'Furry'?"

Jennie Mae came into the doorway, thinking.

"Furry Lewis, you mean? I saw him just last week."

She said that Furry was working for the city; so I called the Memphis City Personnel Office and found out where he was working. It was too late in the afternoon to get him at the job, but later in the evening I found someone who could take me to where he was living. He and his wife, Stella, had had a little difficulty, and Furry had gotten a furnished room in a run-down neighborhood on the north side of town. When we came in he was sitting in bed writing letters, the light coming from a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room. The children of the house ran in and out of the room, jumping onto the bed to watch him write his letters; then calling him "MISTER FURRY" when he looked up. He seemed withdrawn at first, but his reserve soon gave way to a warm friendliness. He no longer had a guitar and he hadn't played much in twenty years, but when I asked him if he could still sing and play he straightened and said, "I'm better now than I ever was."

It is often hard to remember that many of the greatest blues singers of the Twenties were young men when they recorded. The songs they were recording, despite the older tradition of work song material, represented a new musical form, and it was younger men like Furry, who was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, March 6, 1900, who were at their creative peak when they began their careers. When the Depression ended most of the recording in the South they were left with their instruments, a few phonograph records, and often a deep sense of futility. Many of them took jobs like Furry's, like him, not playing much or even keeping their instrument. The blues, however, is a creative musical form, rather than one depending on instrumental virtuosity or vocal technique. A great blues singer brings to his music an emotionalism and

imagination that doesn't depend on technical display. As the singers mature their music often achieves a new expressiveness.

The next afternoon I rented a guitar, a big Epiphone, from a pawn shop on Beale Street, and took it over to Furry's room. He had gotten off work early and was sitting on the porch waiting for me. He carried the guitar inside, sat down and strummed the strings to make sure it was in tune, then looked up and asked me, "What would you like to hear?"

I was surprised that he didn't want to try the guitar a little first, but I managed to think of "John Henry", one of his finest early recordings. Without a moment's hesitation Furry reached in his pocket for his pocket knife, put it between the third and fourth fingers of his left hand to slide along the strings, and sang "John Henry" almost as he had recorded it thirty years before. His fingers weren't as fast as they had been, but there was a new emotional subtlety and assurance in his singing. At fifty-eight years old he was still as exciting as he had been when he was twenty-eight years old. When he finished he leaned back, looked at me, and said, "How was that?"

He knew how it was, he was just making conversation.

When I returned to Memphis in the fall of the year Furry was waiting for me. He and his wife had settled their differences and he was back in their ornate room in a tree shaded frame house on Leath Street. He still didn't have a guitar, but he had spent most of an afternoon sawing the neck off a Royal Crown Cola bottle to use on his little finger. It was easier to slide along the strings than his clumsy pocket knife. I remembered that Gus Cannon, the banjo player who had led "Cannon's Jug Stompers" for Victor Records in the late Twenties, had an old guitar in a case under his bed. My wife and I went out to Cannon's room and rented his instrument, a serviceable Spanish-style instrument of uncertain origin with a red ribbon tied around the neck, for an afternoon session with Furry.

A number of Furry's friends had come to the house to listen to him sing and his wife, Stella, was wearing her best outfit, a red lace dress with bright jeweled accents. One of the young men in the house, a student named Willie Williamson, brought everyone something to drink; then Furry picked up the guitar, tuned it a little nervously and began singing. He was a little self-conscious and stiff, but when he mentioned Stella's name in his first blues she started laughing noisily, everyone joined in, and his mood immediately changed. He sang brilliantly for the rest of the afternoon. The small room, the group of friends, and the quiet afternoon all seemed to fit into the sound of Furry's blues. He is not a strong, domineering performer. His music was a subtle expression of changing moods and emotions. His singing had a sense of eloquence, of quiet maturity. When he finally put the guitar on the floor late in the afternoon his friends were sitting in a silent circle inside the room and out into the hallway, still caught up in the mood of the music.

Watching Furry cutting weeds in the hot afternoon sun it was hard to think of him as one of the great singers. But Furry Lewis's music is an expression of his own emotions and imagination and in his simple, reflective life he has found the materials for a blues style of classic purity and style. The penciled message on his hat, too, suggested some of the delight with life that has given to his blues their warmth and vitality.

"KID FURRY - Have Gun, Will Travel."

SIDE ONE

- Band 1. LONGING BLUES
Band 2. JOHN HENRY
Band 3. I WILL TURN YOUR MONEY GREEN
Band 4. Early Recording Career
Band 5. PEARLEE BLUES

SIDE TWO

- Band 1. JUDGE BOUSHAY BLUES
Band 2. I'M GOING TO BROWNSVILLE
Band 3. The Medicine Shows
Band 4. CASEY JONES
Band 5. EAST ST. LOUIS BLUES

Walter "Furry" Lewis, guitar and voice, recorded in Memphis, Tennessee, October 3, 1959, by Samuel B. Charters, A. R. Danberg, technical assistant. One selection, I'M GOING TO BROWNSVILLE, recorded February 18, 1959 by S. B. Charters. Ampex Equipment, ElectroVoice 636 microphone.

Furry Lewis, like many blues singers, has a very casual approach to the material he is using for a particular blues. A few of his songs - JOHN HENRY and CASEY JONES are among them - are more or less set as to accompaniment style and verse arrangements, but his singing is generally a rather free interpretation of a roughly thought-out verse pattern and accompaniment. It is this casualness that has given the blues much of its vitality. A singer who repeats a blues over and over, without altering it to suit his moods or his audience, soon becomes a little dull, and the blues audience is a demanding one. A singer has to come across. A man like Furry has to have a large repertoire of material to use when he's singing. Rather than trying to remember a carefully worked out arrangement he simply uses whatever verses and musical styles suit the mood he is building. The casualness is suited to the blues. Without it the blues might have reached a more consistent level of performance, but there would have been few of the sudden moments of expressive eloquence that have given the blues their drama and excitement.

Furry has always been very nonchalant in his singing. There is a long blues fragment, his MONDAY WOMAN, that he usually sings as part of another blues. On this recording it is the last part of his I WILL TURN YOUR MONEY GREEN. He has sung it for me as part of both PEARLEE BLUES and LONGING BLUES. Blues collectors will recognize it as the same song that Furry's close friend, Jim Jackson, recorded for Victor Records as MY MONDAY WOMAN BLUES. The blues Furry recorded as I'M GOING TO BROWNSVILLE is similar to the recording made by another singer in Memphis, Sleepy John Estes, titled THE GIRL I LOVE, SHE GOT LONG CURLY HAIR. There is usually such a casual atmosphere in blues recording sessions that the singer himself will forget what he has recorded. Furry's PEARLEE BLUES, on this recording, is similar to his old DRY LAND BLUES, recorded for Victor in 1928. He did a version of I WILL TURN YOUR MONEY GREEN at the same session, but the version he recorded for this set is quite different from the earlier blues. The first verses on the 1928 recording began -

"When I was in Missouri, would not let me be.
When I was in Missouri, would not let me be.
Wouldn't rest content 'til I came to Tennessee.

If you follow me, babe, I turn your money green.
Follow, babe, I turn your money green.
I'll show you more money than Rockefeller ever seen.

If the river was whiskey, baby, and I was a duck.
River was whiskey, baby, and I was a duck.
I'd dive to the bottom and I never would come up. . . "

The later version begins -

"If you follow me, baby, I will turn your money green.
Follow me, baby, I will turn your money green.
Show you more money than Rockefeller ever seen.

Baby, that's all right, baby, any old way you do.
Baby, that's all right, just any old way you do.
Someday you may want me and I 'clare I won't want you. . . "



FURRY LEWIS WITH FRIENDS

photo by S. B. Charters

Probably the most immediately striking thing about Furry's style is the variety of his accompaniments. He seems to have learned every style of guitar he encountered in his years of wandering with the rural medicine shows. Many very good blues artists tend to find an instrumental style very early in their careers and use the same accompaniment for every blues. They use the same runs, the same solo melodies, and the same harmonic patterns in blues after blues. The most creative singer usually avoided this in one of two ways. A Lemon Jefferson or a Robert Johnson or a Lightnin' Hopkins used the guitar as an extension of their voice, developing extended variations on the vocal line in their guitar accompaniments. A Furry Lewis or a John Hurt developed several guitar styles and used whatever seemed to suit their vocal material. On this recording Furry uses the bottleneck on four selections (Side One, Bands 1, 2, and 6 and Side Two, Band 1), a pocket knife held between his fingers on one (Side Two, Band 2) and uses three different styles of finger picking for the others. I have seen him play Hawaiian style, with the guitar laid across his lap, and a rhythmically

regular flat picked style, similar to older white styles in the Memphis area. Furry even surprised me one afternoon by playing his guitar while he was swinging it by the neck with his left hand. As the guitar swung toward him he stroked it with his right hand and gave it another push. It was an old trick he'd learned from the banjo player, Gus Cannon.

With so much musical material to draw upon it is not surprising that Furry often will play several different styles of accompaniment for the same blues. Once he has begun and established the mood of a particular performance he develops his accompaniment in the same style, but he is liable to accompany a blues with an Hawaiian style one afternoon and with a finger picking style two or three days later.



THE "BOTTLENECK" STYLE

photo by F. A. Usher Jr.

The performances on this recording show many of the characteristics of his musical approach. There are roughnesses and occasional passages that are not completely successful, but there are also passages of imaginative brilliance. An excellent example is the bass line in the third verse of I WILL TURN YOUR MONEY GREEN. As he sings -

"Baby, you know you didn't want me when you layin'
'cross my bed,
Drinking your white lightnin' talking all out your
head. . ."

he sets against it an ascending bass line that suddenly changes the mood of the verse to a more dramatic statement than the verses that have preceded it. He uses two tunings, the regular E-A-D-G-B-E' for finger-picking or flat picking and the "Spanish tuning", E-A-E'-A-C#-E'', for the bottleneck and Hawaiian styles.

At first Furry's voice seems to have a limiting sameness in style, but he has chosen to work within a much more restricted area than a more melodramatic singer like Lighthin' Hopkins. Furry's expressiveness and subtlety have an almost intimate feeling. He is in many ways one of the most personal blues singers. To hear fully the subtlety in Furry's singing is to gain an insight not only into the singer, but into the creative process of the blues itself.

A DISCOGRAPHY OF THE EARLY RECORDINGS OF FURRY LEWIS *

- | | | |
|-----------|---|----------------------------------|
| E5122-23W | Rock Island Blues
Vo 1111 | (Chicago, May 18,
1927) |
| E5124-25W | Everybody's Blues
Vo 1111 | |
| E5180-81W | Jellyroll
Vo 1115 | (Chicago, May 25,
1927) |
| E5182-83W | Mr. Furry's Blues
Vo 1115 | |
| E5184-85W | Sweet Papa Moan
Vo 1116
rev. Vo 1116: Blind Joe Amos | |
| E6688-89W | Good Looking Girl Blues
Vo 1132 | (Chicago, October
24, 1927) |
| E6690-91W | Billy Lyons And Stock
O'Lee Vo 1132;
Br 80092 BL 59001 | |
| E6692-93W | Big Chief Blues
Vo 1133 | |
| E6694-95W | Falling Down Blues
Vo 1133 | |
| E6696-97W | Mean Old Bed Bug Blues
Vo 1134 | |
| E6698-99W | Why Don't You Come
Home Blues Vo 1134
Br issues titled Stackerlee | |
| EVE45424 | Furry's Blues
Vic V38519 | (Memphis, August
28, 1928) |
| EVE45424 | I Will Turn Your Money
Green
Vic V38506,
X LVA3032 | |
| EVE45428 | Mistreatin' Mama
Vic V38519 | |
| EVE45429 | Dry Land Blues
Vic 23345,
X LVA3032 | |
| EVE45430 | Cannon Ball Blues
Vic 23345,
X LVA3032 | |
| EVE45431 | Kassie Jones Blues -
Pt. 1 Vic 21664 | |
| EVE45432 | Kassie Jones Blues -
Pt. 2 Vic 21664 | |
| EVE45433 | Judge Harsh Blues
Vic V38506 | |
| M181 | John Henry -
Pt. 1 Vo 1474 | (Memphis, September
22, 1929) |
| M182 | John Henry -
Pt. 2 Vo 1474 | |
| M185 | Black Gypsy Blues
Vo 1547 | |
| M186 | Creeper's Blues
Vo 1547 | |

* As listed in Jazz Directory, v.6, compiled by Albert J. McCarthy and Dave Carey, London: Cassell & Co., 1957.

Record Label Abbreviations: Vo - Vocalion
Br - Brunswick
BL - Blue Lake
Vic- Victor

An example of Furry's earlier singing will be found on Folkways Record FP251, AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC, Volume I. His long version of KASSIE JONES, originally on Victor 21664, is included. For further material on the early blues and blues singers the book THE COUNTRY BLUES, by Samuel B. Charters, published by Rinehart & Co. in 1959, is suggested reading.