



## credits:

The Sam Collins photo courtesy S.B. CHARTERS;  
Our thanks to BERNARD KLATZKO for loaning us  
rare Collins 78's from his own collection; bio-  
graphical information courtesy GAYLE DEAN WARD,  
LOW; Recording dates, places, courtesy of Blues  
& Gospel Records 1902 to 1942 by R.M.W. Dixon  
and J. Godrich.

**ORIGIN JAZZ LIBRARY**

PRODUCED BY



ON APRIL, 1927, SAM COLLINS BECAME THE FIRST OF THE GREAT MISSISSIPPI BLUES SINGERS TO RECORD IN ANY KIND OF DEPTH. HIS SIZEABLE OUTPUT INCLUDES THE FIRST RECORDED COUNTRY BLUES VERSIONS OF SUCH CLASSICS AS "JAIL HOUSE BLUES, MIDNIGHT SPECIAL, YELLOW DOG BLUES, AND HESITATION BLUES". LIKE PATTON, COLLINS IS AT THE "CORE". FROM THIS POSITION, HE HAS BEEN MORE INFLUENTIAL AT MORE DIFFERENT LEVELS THAN MORE WIDELY HEARD BLUES SINGERS, SUCH AS BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON. THE PERSONAL ACCOUNT BELOW GOES BACK TO THE 1950's; IT RECOUNTS THE SURREALISTIC "COLLECTOR'S LIFE" AND THE IMPACT THAT COLLINS HAD ON IT.

## Sam Collins & the Gennett madness

This personal piece is written as a tribute to both Sam Collins and Gennett. Because, 11 years ago, it was the elegant Electrobeam label and Sam Collins, the best Gennett ever had, that started me in this shocking collector's madness. Even today, this madness seems very real. What with the surprising influx of 78-rpm auction lists, I have given up newspapers (they didn't fill the vacuum). News from the Far East sector ("casualties were estimated at 5000 this week. Their bodies, etc.") meant nothing to me. I was, after all, a record collector. Of course, there is the remote satisfaction that comes from all impending disasters: it helps me identify with mankind; the comradeship, the last-minute loasting at the airport. But that is all. So it was, that I approached record collecting, the Sam Collins notes, the world outside, and my own madness of 11 years ago.

August, 1965: on the hottest night of the year, John Fahey, Bill Givens, Bernie Klatzko, Al Wilson arrived at my apartment, 39 Rensselaer Street, Brooklyn. Once inside the living room, Fahey set up a tape recorder on the floor and Al Wilson arranged his chair as a barricade across the room. By nine p.m., there was a lot of cigarette smoke and somebody brought in beer. Briefly, Sam Collins and the notes for GNL-10 came into the conversation. I hadn't been able to write anything. I have always been unable to write, except about Balto-Slavic geography, sports events, and graphic arts (like the color peculiarities of the 1931-32 Champion label). After all, what could I say about Collins? There are things about one's own life that would be hard to describe. In fact, the notes were going badly and I asked for quotes about Collins.

Al Wilson, "Collins is the third best one-song man."

"Here, write it down," I said.

"Collins is the third best one-song man. Akers is THE best and King Solomon Hill is second ... Collins has the most amorphous right hand of all time."



John Fahey, "He's always out of tune, but it doesn't matter."

Bernie Klatsko, "I'm dead serious about this. If I were asked to introduce someone to great country blues music, I would reach for either 'Devil In The Lion's Den' or 'Jailhouse Blues'..."

For 11 years, Collins has been frozen in the past. Like someone you meet once, it was the first impression I remembered. I first heard Collins when I was in the Navy. Collins sounded young. It seemed we were both young at the same time. Now, 11 years later, the shock about getting older is that you begin to look like Lyndon B. Johnson or Charles Colburn or Arturo Toscanini. It was in the late spring of 1954, before such things were possible, and I was ending it as an enlisted Navy Journalist. Five of us had come off a series of overseas drinking bouts. We had been relieved of 12-month U.S. Sixth Fleet assignments in the Mediterranean, and after surviving the year overseas, we found ourselves back in Newport, R.I., awaiting fresh assignments. It was all we could do to keep our heads above water.

One fellow from Texas had made good in a big way. He discovered the possibilities of a Navy-civilian lonely hearts club, an import-export deal involving slot machines from Mexico, and the K-E-Y to the Little Rock, Ark. dog races. As a Navy Journalist, he never wrote a news story or took a photo. It was all buy and sell in those days.

Another Journalist was writing a novel about the NAVY. He carried a black notebook. From our conversations, he'd jot in things for the novel and it made me feel C.K., like the Navy was a play and I was on the stage. Two other Journalists were big on Broadway show tunes and the opera. They were ignored and forgotten, often the lot of fellows who are terribly weak or embarrassingly nice.

Totally unrelated to Navy life that spring, was the appearance of George W. Kay's article in The Record Changer about Gennett Records, the deluxe recording enterprise owned by Starr Piano Company of Richmond, Ind. George Kay's article was the first to mention Sam Collins. The article also brought home the miracle that anything at all was ever recorded in the late 1920's.

It had come down to this: by 1926, sales were off because people were buying radios instead of records. For a while, record companies appeared to make a comeback with electric recording. But this was not the real picture. Over at Gennett, the view was all downhill. Several years had passed since the public could be reached with "novelties" like King Oliver, New Orleans Rhythm Kings, Morton, Wolverines, etc. Understandably, the thinking had become internal. An immediate problem was to save artist's fees. As a result, record sessions became more informal and Gennett continued to stay alive by recording practically anybody -- unknown pianists like Frank Melrose and Herve Duerson, obscure singers like Lottie Kimbrough, Jaybird Coleman, William Harris, Mae Glover, and Sam Collins. Other evidence of internal thinking was the profitless introduction of new labels. There was the new black and gold Electrobeam Gennett (still only 75¢) and the ob-



scure affiliates or subsidiaries: orange-colored Champion (you could get the identical Gennett performances on Champion for 35¢), purple Black Patti (the label featured an opulent pheasant), Superior, and Sears-Robuck's Supertone and Silvertone labels.

A coincidence peculiar to record collecting happened, (I won an E- copy of Sam Collins' "Jail House Blues/Riverside Blues", Gennett 6167, offered at auction the same as the article).

We were sitting in the Newport, R.I. "home office" in our sailor uniforms in front of typewriters, drinking red KOOL-AID and perhaps imagining ourselves as U.P. correspondents in civilian clothes, when the box came. I had had a Schick Injector razor blade ready for days. I slit the top, ripped open the flaps, and began to pull out the stuffings.

The fellow who was writing the novel watched me take out the record and examine it. He came over and examined it. And I examined it again, searching for the feared, hidden hair crack in shipping. The legend "New Electro-beam Gennett" was in Old English face. The label itself had an aura of deep varnish about it, like a pre-Renaissance Van Eyk.

I put the Collins Gennett on the turntable of a portable Emerson that was used occasionally for party records (grandiose performances, such as "The Great Crepitation Contest"). However, it would have been nice to have gotten a universal reaction to Collins: "struck dumb with the etc. ... made speechless by the etc." Unfortunately, nothing of the sort happened.

This Journalist from Texas was the only one of us not drinking KOOL-AID. He had been hunched over his typewriter with a pint bottle of Muscatel. He then tipped up the pint and slipped it into one of the drawers of his desk. "It's alive, man. It's KOOL-AID," he said.

Another Journalist, an opera fan, made this comment; "He is one of these...you know...untrained tenors," he said.

It was the 1950's and Collins made no converts that day.

Yet, it helps to get an idea of the impact Collins had, if you measure it against the background of the early 50's. At that time, canned music, Muzak, was suddenly everywhere. This became especially clear after I had got out of the Navy by the summer of 1954 and into the ERA OF MUZAK!

I spent the rest of the summer in New Jersey with my father. In those days, my old man was a Duncan Hines fan. He had a copy of Duncan Hines' Adventures in Eating, which described and rated all the C.K. restaurants in the U.S. When a new edition of the book came out, the ratings changed and sometimes a restaurant or two dropped out of sight. That summer, my father wore this yachting cap, a tropical worsted suit, black sunglasses and sandals (since he was on

retirement. I too had retired (from the Navy) and my wife and I were still in an open-air with flies and with the air-conditioned restaurants in northern New Jersey and around New Jersey and south Jersey. Being what it was, the 1950's, you'd listen to Duke and Louis Armstrong while putting down a portion of mashed potatoes or sipping turtle soup or sipping into a tossed salad. You'd hear it first on the car radio and then in the restaurant kitchen. You'd hear the same thing in the waitress put the check face down and then you left the tip and went to the bar's door.

For business, you could hear the complete Armstrong nation at Pat's Club in East Orange, N.J., a place where gentlemen with cigars and business suits and ladies like came in and ate roast beef. We were eating the roast beef one evening and this drunk sitting at the table next to us was complaining about his wife and he wanted to shake hands with us and all that. A couple of waiters came over and after a while, he let her over and went into the floor with all this named dinner music and Armstrong as they go into upright and out of there. He finished my roast beef and then ordered the Red Mountain New France New Castle and you could hear their laughing from the walls and ceilings, and stepping up through the floors. Later, he headed for the door. It was all very comical. Sarah was crying from the terribly painted death mask of the husband as she said, "Please drop it again."

"Hello there," my father said.

Afterwards, my old man moved up the block. "That place is bad news," he said.

Frank made me think. The Collins equal to the taste of the 1950's? If you thought something was good and it stretched good, but didn't serve any purpose, was it still good? The Collins taste as people's art? Could he have kept things smooth like Armstrong? But I wasn't one to waste much on that train of thought.

Day after day, the two of us sped past the flat New Jersey landscape through a succession of baroque and blood statistics, searching for the world of good eating. After dinner, we spent the evening playing miniature golf under fluorescent lights in Roselle and Roselle, N.J., and there was Samuel Bryan Smith. Samuel was drunk over, but there was still time. By September, we had trained our past down to a fine thread.

Pat arrived. It is in fall that one dreams of summer, and for the last time, the smell of beer and summer life from a dark cavern (the hope, the promise of a new day can never be fulfilled, sometimes to be checked under by nostalgia. Or one dreams of winter...

I woke up Tuesday one morning after a dream. In the dream it had turned white and the sky was a victory cheer. I had climbed up a long flight of stairs to reach my grandmother's chair. I suddenly saw them on the main floor, stacks of Robinsons Gamble with the Gellins on the table. When I woke up, the sun was much too hot. It was at the wrong angle through the window. It was afternoon. My father was leaning against the bedroom



door, looking in. He suggested I look for a job. "Capitalize on your youth. Carve out a career for yourself," he said.

A couple of weeks later, I rented a furnished room in Brooklyn and I got a job as mail boy in an advertising agency in N.Y.C. As schizoid victims of 20th Century Calvinism, the mail boys wore business hats and carried leather briefcases. Morale in the mail room at ole' DCS&S was certainly low, what with everybody ruthlessly vying to be account execs, copywriters, TV producers, and Stork Club regulars. In fact, one fellow, a problem drinker, disappeared in Central Park during an uptown mail delivery. A couple days later, he got his picture in the Daily News, as part of a feature on New York's natural parks, under the caption SLEEPING IT OFF. I remember, he was wearing the same suit we had last seen him in. The photo showed this fellow lying on his back, expired in the grass, with shoes and socks off. The camera had also caught a close-up of a spotted dog licking the toes of one foot. As you can imagine, it was all tres depressant. I wasn't getting into the big time. I was nowhere.

The parcel post arrival of an E/ Sam Collins' Black Patti, "Yellow Dog Blues/Loving Lady Blues", kept things going for a while. Then I left the mail room in the advertising agency, the furnished room in Brooklyn, and moved into the lower East Side and into a job splicing hair tonic commercials onto obscure TV jungle films. Meanwhile, the Collins records kept coming in. It would have been embarrassing (except for my own overriding greed). I was cleaning up. They arrived in boxes from all over the U.S.A., on Gemett, on Champion as "Jim Foster", and even on Conqueror as "Bunny Carter". Two hideously scarred copies of Black Patti 8025 and a cracked Black Patti 8025 contributed to the tidal flow. Over the years, I left several jobs and my Collins collection was complete except for the two religious titles and that elusive clean copy of "Devil In The Lion's Den".

Collins was a high moment in the past. With others it was Bunk Johnson or Blind Willie Johnson, or the great days of The Record Changer, when that magazine came to grips with the only really important problem in life: Bop versus New Orleans Jazz.

But what has all this really to do with Sam Collins? Not very much, I'm afraid. And what can you say about Collins? Not a hell of a lot, really. Collins and the country blues and All Of It Today had to tread water in the 1950's. So long Kostolanetz, Doris Day, Stan Kenton, Julius LaRosa, Dizzy, Flip, Irv. It was goodbye to all that.

Gayle Dean Wardlow has turned up the only biographical information on Collins: Collins was raised in McComb, Miss. He left to record in Chicago, April, 1927 and at Richmond, Ind. on September and then December, 1927. Collins recorded again in New York on September and December

Gayle Dean Wardlow has turned up the only biograph-



ical information on Collins: Collins was raised in McComb, Miss. He left to record in Chicago, April, 1927 and at Richmond, Ind. on September and then December, 1927. Collins recorded again in New York on October, 1931, and December, 1932 (probably). Sam Collins may have lived in Chicago through the 30's, 40's, and into the early 1950's. He is reported to have died of carbon monoxide poisoning in Chicago during the 1950's.

Several interesting points come from John Fahey and Al Wilson. According to Fahey, Collins plays a great many parallel fifths and fourths at his April, 1927, Chicago session (Jail House, Devil, Yellow Dog, Loving Lady, Riverside). The guitar is tuned in open E, except on "Riverside Blues", where standard tuning in the key of C is used. To paraphrase Al Wilson, Collins plays in open E (from the top string down - E B G# E B E). The third string (G#), or the major third, is always tuned flat, putting it in the blue note area. In addition, Collins uses the IV chord (without the 5th fret), but not the V chord (7th fret).

Nothing could be complete without mentioning a recent controversy. Several years ago, it was thought that Sam Collins was Sam Butler. This year, it's King Solomon Hill. The Hill consensus has a little more weight than Butler. Several authorities say so. As fuel, we've included two sides by Hill.

The Hill-Collins hypothesis is based on a guitar similarity between four Hill sides and Collins' October, 1931, American Record Corp. session in New York. Are Sam Collins and King Solomon Hill really the same? The question is, of course, do we really exist? I think that is what we are really trying to say. Even Immanuel Kant has said this. Today, his eyes are the same Baltic blue they were years ago and he speaks English as precisely, as severely as ever. He finds it hard to believe in what happened to Germany ("East Prussia in ashes"). The old master from Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) speaks to those who are still willing to listen. He says he wants us to forget the past. He says he had nothing to do with the "Bavarian rabble-rousers that took over in 1932". "Those men were nothing," he said. Nevertheless, it came as a shock to us all, when, only a few months ago, he was "rediscovered" quietly, anonymously selling frankfurters on 42nd & Broadway. "Sure, I've come down these last few years," he said. "But so have the rest of you."

(P.W.)

## Discography:

SAM COLLINS: (vcl., acc. by own guitar); Chicago, c. April 23, 1927 -- (12736) The Jail House Blues: Gen 6167, Ch 15320, Her 92043; (12736-A) The Jail House Blues: BP 8025, S11 5127, Spt 9291; (12737) Devil In The Lion's Den: Bell 1173, Spr 350; (12737-A) Devil In The Lion's Den: Gen 6181, Ch 15359; (12738) Yellow Dog Blues: Gen 6146, Ch 15320, BP 8026, S11 5127; (12739) Loving Lady Blues: Gen 6146, Ch 15320, BP 8026; (12740) Riverside Blues: Gen 6167, Ch 15301, BP 8025, Her 92043.

SAM COLLINS: (vcl., acc. by own guitar); Richmond, Ind., c. September 17, 1927 -- (13032) Dark Cloudy Blues: Gen 6260, Ch 15397, Bell 1181, Spr 369; (13033) Hesitation Blues: Gen



6379, Ch 15472, Bell 1173, Sil 5131, Spr 350; (13034-A) Pork Chop Blues: Gen 6260, Ch 15359, Spr 330, Spt 9291; (13035) Midnight Special Blues: Gen 6307, Ch 15397, Bell 1181, Cq 7266, Spr 330; (13036) I Want To Be Like Jesus In My Heart: Gen 6291, Sil 5172; (13037) Lead Me All The Way: Gen 6291; (13049-A) It Won't Be Long: Gen 6379, Ch 15453, Cq 7266; (13050-A) Do That Thing: Gen 6307, Ch 15453, Bell 1180, Sil 5131, Spr 369.

SAM COLLINS, JOHN D. FOX ACC. BY SAM COLLINS (GTR.)\*, DUETS WITH JOHN D. FOX\*\*: Richmond, Ind., Wednesday, Dec. 14, 1927 -- (GEX-1010-A) Railroad Blues: Gen unissued; (GEX-1011-A) The Worried Man Blues\*: Gen 6352, Bell 1190, Ch 15416, Spr 389; (GEX-1012-A) Your Time Is Windin' Up\*\*: Gen unissued; (GEX-1013-A) I've Got No Lovin' Baby Now: Gen unissued; (GEX-1014-A) Lonesome Lane Blues: Gen unissued; (GEX-1015-A) Rattlesnake Blues: Gen unissued; (GEX-1016-A) Black Cat's Bone: Gen unissued; (GEX-1017-A) Midnight Dream: Gen unissued; (GEX-1018-A) Long Time Rubin: Gen unissued; (GEX-1019-A) The Moanin' Blues\*(said to be recorded Dec. 15, 1927): Gen 6352, Bell 1190; (GEX-1020-A) My Mother Took A Train One Mornin'\*\*: Gen unissued; (GEX-1021-A) Hallelujah\*\*: Gen unissued; (GEX-1022-A) All Mourners: Gen unissued; (GEX-1023-B) I'm Goin' Back To Jesus: Gen unissued.

SAM COLLINS: (vol, acc. by own guitar): New York, Thursday, October 8, 1931 -- (10835-) Broken House Blues: ARC unissued; (10836-) Lonesome Road Blues (I'm Goin' Down That Lonesome Road): Ban 32669, Mel M-12598, Or 8196, Per 0222, Rom 5196; (10837-1) New Salty Dog: Ban 32311, Or 8106, Per 193, Rom 5106; (10838-) Atlanta Fire: ARC unissued; (10839-2) Slow Mama Slow: Ban 32311, Or 8106, Per 193, Rom 5106; (10840-) Troubled In Mind: ARC unissued; (10841-2) Signifying Blues: Ban 32395, Or 8127, Per 0203, Rom 5127; (10842-2) I'm Still Sitting On Top Of The World: Ban 32395, etc. as last title; (10843-) Toenail Plang Dang: ARC unissued; (10844-) Graveyard Digger's Blues (No Loving Baby Now): Ban 32669, Mel M-12598, Or 8196, Per 0222, Rom 5196; (10845-) Flat Top Blues: ARC unissued; (10846-) Careless Love: ARC unissued; (10847-) Do That Thing: ARC unissued; (10848-) How Long, How Long: ARC unissued; (10849-) I Believe I'll Get Dirty: ARC unissued. New York, Friday, October 9, 1931 -- (10850-) Sad And Lonesome: ARC unissued; (10851-) Maybe Next Week Sometime: ARC unissued; (10852-) Mojo Blues: ARC unissued; (10853-) Lone-Night Blues: ARC unissued; (10854-) Blue Heaven Blues: ARC unissued. New York, Tuesday, December 27, 1932 -- (10845-) FlatTop Blues: ARC unissued; (10847-) Do That Thing: ARC unissued; (10850-) Sad And Lonesome: ARC unissued.

KING SOLOMON HILL: (Vol., acc. by own gtr.); Grafton, Wis., c. January, 1932 -- (L-1252-1,-2) Whoopee Blues: Para 13116, Crown 3325, Vars 6010; (L-1253-1,-2) Down On My Bended Knee: same; (L-1254-2) The Gone Dead Train: Para 13129, Ch 50022; (L-1258-2) Tell Me Baby: same; (unknown master no.) My Buddy Blind Papa Lemon: Para 13125; (unknown master no.) Times Has Done Got Out Of Hand: Para 13125.

COLLINS PSEUDONYMS: Ch-Jim Foster; Bell-Big Boy Woods; Cq-Bunny Carter; Sil-Jim Foster; ARC (Ban, Mel, Per, Or, Rom) - Salty Dog Sam. FOX PSEUDONYMS: Bell-Alex Monroe; Ch-Emory Brooks. HILL PSEUDONYMS: Vars-Down South Boys.

LABEL ABBREVIATIONS: Gen-Gennett; Ch-Champion; Spr-Superior; Sil-Silver-tone; Her-Herwin; BP-Black Patti; Spt-Supertone; Cq-Conqueror; Ban-Banner; Mel-Melotone; Per-Perfect; Or-Orion; Rom-Romeo; (ARC-American Record Corp.-the last 5