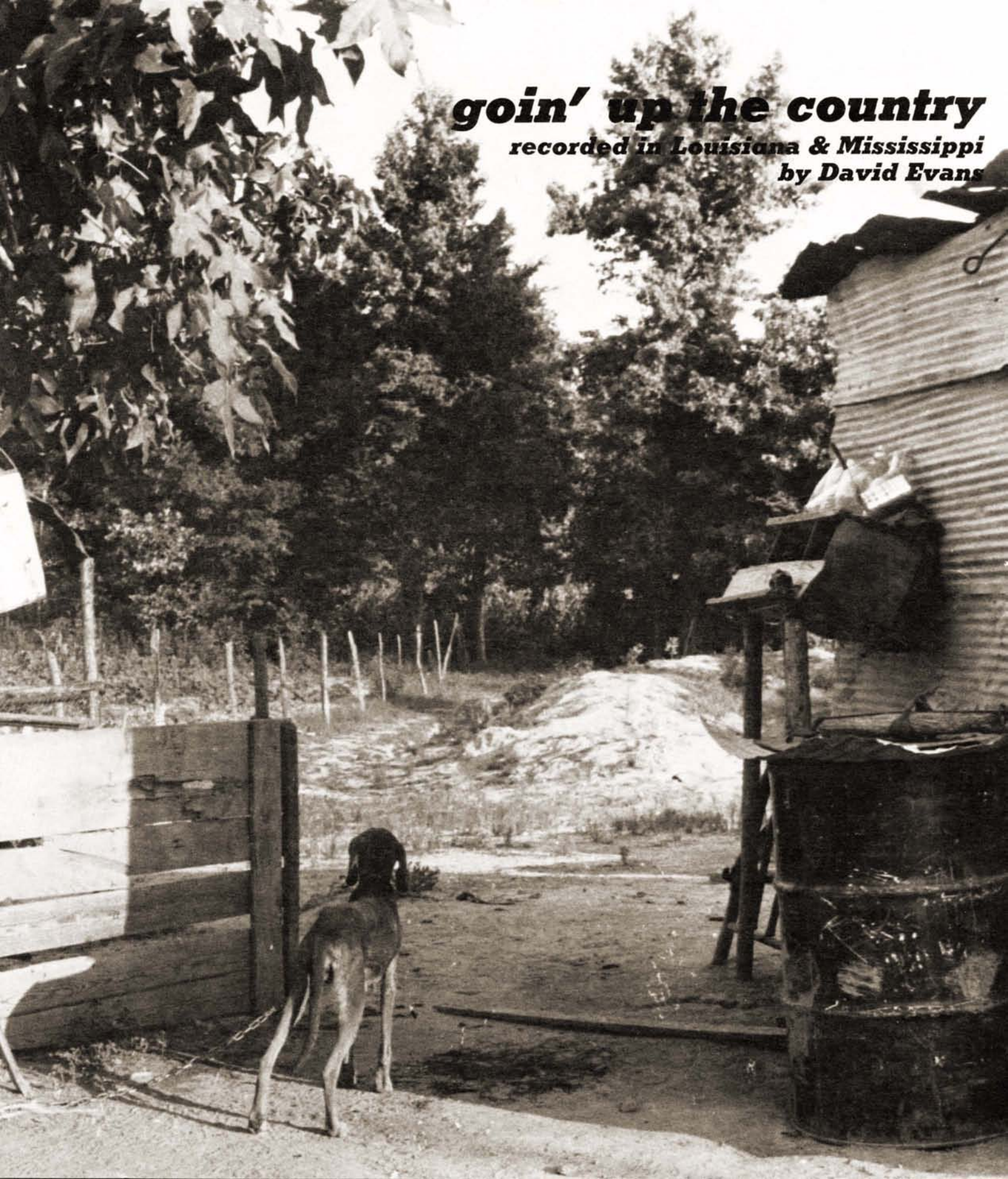


goin' up the country

***recorded in Louisiana & Mississippi
by David Evans***





Herb Quinn



DE Jack Owens

CE



Mager Johnson

MB



Arzo Youngblood

DE

It has been asserted that all the great bluesmen have either died or been "rediscovered", which assumes, of course, that all the greatest performers in blues history somehow got onto record in the 1920's or later. This position is held by a surprisingly large number of record collectors, many of whom will even refuse to listen to a blues performance unless it is enshrined in the shellac of a 78-rpm disc.

Until just a few years ago I had felt this way myself. However, after hearing Fred McDowell, Robert Pete Williams, Mance Lipscomb, and other bluesmen who had been newly found in the field by professional and amateur folklorists, I began to conclude that such fine singers as these were important exceptions, artists who either had been overlooked or found commercially wanting for the current Negro record market by the major U.S. record firms. Then in 1965 I began recording and interviewing blues artists on my own, and in the summer of 1966 spent about five weeks in Louisiana and Mississippi taping older country musical styles. These fifteen performances by ten artists are among the best I recorded there. They show that there is a rich reservoir of country blues in the American South still to be tapped.

All the songs are composed and sung in traditional country style. That is, the singer puts together a series of loosely connected, or even unconnected, traditional lines and stanzas, each of which usually can stand alone as a truthful description of life as the singer's audience knows it. These statements have been selected and refined through a traditional process that has operated in the southern U.S. for more than seven decades. Their effectiveness lies, in fact, in their very familiarity to the audience and in the power with which the singers can reaffirm the truth which is at their core. This calls for an expressive vocal style and the ability to support this with appropriate instrumental accompaniment, usually on guitar or harmonica. The artists heard in this album more than adequately fulfill these requirements: all were recommended to me by other musicians who believed them to be among the best in the blues traditions of their respective localities.

The songs treat of many subjects, but the most common theme is also the most universal one in song, the problems of love. Breakup of the family is a fact of life for many, and its high incidence among American Negroes is doubtless the partial result of economic pressures. L. V. Conerly sings, "Bad luck and trouble; we cannot live together any more," while Roosevelt Holts expresses the loneliness of the man abandoned by his woman:

*Lord, she put me outdoors through the
sleet and snow.*

*Well, I was stone barefooted; I didn't
have nowhere to go.*

Herb Quinn answers the lament, "Got nobody to feel and care for me," with the whine of his knife-handle on the strings of his guitar.

That the man can also reject the woman is seen in the words of Arzo Youngblood:

Well, I'm leaving now, baby; crying won't make me stay.

Lord, the more you cry, darling, the further you drive me away.

and Mager Johnson asserts the man's need for independence with these lines:

Lord, ain't going down the big road by myself.

If I can't carry you, gonna carry somebody else.

Then, too, there always is poverty. Jack Owens sings:

Want to go home, and I ain't got sufficient clothes.

Well, I ain't got so many, baby; got so far to go.

But the blues is not all hard luck and women trouble. The men often sing in a lighter vein, as does "Boogie" Bill Webb in his Dooleyville Blues, or Owens, who sings, "The devil got religion, baby; Lord, he joined the Baptist Church." Such is the variety of traditional blues lyrics.

Only a few of the artists here included have ever appeared on record previously, and none are well known to blues listeners outside their home locales. Babe Stovall, who plays guitar on one selection, earlier had an entire LP of his music issued, but it is no longer available in general release (though it may still be obtained at New Orleans' Preservation Hall). "Boogie" Bill Webb recorded four blues performances for Imperial Records in the early 1950's; two were issued, but the disc is now quite rare. The performances, however, do not represent the full depth of Webb's repertoire. L. V. Conerly claims to be the guitarist on one side of a record by the late Rev. Utah Smith, and Isaiah Chattman has appeared as rhythm guitarist on a few sides by Silas Hogan. None of these men, however, are thought of by their friends, or even by themselves, primarily as recording artists.

Several musicians in this album grew up and learned their blues in the vicinity of one town, Tylertown, Mississippi. The variety in their performance styles aptly illustrates the several layers of tradition that can comprise the blues of even a small locality. Herb Quinn, 72, is a respected elder figure in Tylertown's music, being equally skilled on guitar, mandolin, violin, and piano. For many years he played in a string band that performed throughout southern Mississippi and Louisiana, but a throat operation caused him to give up an active musical career about fifteen years ago. Today he owns a lovely forty-acre farm north of Franklinton, Louisiana, where, with his wife and two children, he raises a little of nearly every fruit, vegetable, and domestic animal imaginable. His *Casey, You Can't Ride This Train*, is a variant of the widespread blues of hobo-

ing, *Poor Boy, Long Way from Home*. This song, which he learned from his brother, employs "knife" style guitar accompaniment.

Herb helped teach many younger musicians, among them O. D. Jones, 54, and Babe Stovall, 60, both of whom now live in New Orleans but who used to play together at country parties around Tylertown. Babe's sensitive second guitar work on *Got the Blues This Morning* demonstrates his thorough familiarity with his partner's style.

Roosevelt Holts, 63, learned most of his blues in Jackson, Mississippi, and indicates his acquaintance with that city's blues traditions in *Nowhere to Go*, in which he alludes to various Negro districts there. His "bottleneck" guitar style on *My Phone Keeps Ringing* was learned in McComb, Mississippi. Today Roosevelt lives in Bogalusa, Louisiana.

Arzo Youngblood, 49, now a New Orleans resident, learned guitar as a teenager from the great Tommy Johnson, who married Arzo's aunt and who lived in Tylertown for several years in the late 1930's. Arzo's *Bye and Bye Blues* reflects Johnson's country dance-playing techniques. Arzo, incidentally, once owned a copy of Johnson's recording of this song.

Mager (pronounced "Major") Johnson, 62, is a younger brother of Tommy Johnson and has lived all his life around Crystal Springs, Mississippi, where he currently works in a boiler room. Both his performances here reflect the style he learned from his late brother, and, in fact, Mager's playing and singing are even closer in style than were Tommy's to those of Willie Brown and Charlie Patton, Tommy's mentors—despite the fact that Mager never met either Patton or Brown.

The blues of Jack Owens, 64, and Cornelius Bright, 45, exemplify two layers of tradition in Benton, Mississippi, where both have lived all their lives. They perform in a style which has developed locally among many musicians, including the famous Skip James. Owens grew up with James, and both learned the style together from the same older musicians. Owens lives in the country, where he tends cattle and operates a small juke joint in the front of his house. Although he has a juke-box on his premises, he continues to play guitar for dancing, and his strongly rhythmic yet intricate style still brings couples out on the floor. Cornelius Bright sings and plays in a more ornate, less rhythmic style, as will be seen by comparing his version of *Devil Got My Woman* with that of Jack Owens. This song is probably the best known and most popular one in the area.

Though a native of New Orleans, "Boogie" Bill Webb, 42, learned the older musical style in which he performs in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1940's. His *Dooleyville Blues*, learned from other musicians there, celebrates a Negro neighborhood in the southern part of the city. Webb recalls that after leaving Jackson he went on to Chicago, where he played with Fats Domino and



Roosevelt Holts

DE



O. D. Jones

MB



Boogie Bill Webb

DE

Chuck Berry for a time. Today he performs rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues in New Orleans, but is still proud of his ability to play the older blues songs he heard in his youth.

Louisiana traditions are represented by two other artists. L. V. Conerly, 48, has lived in Franklinton most of his life except for a few years in his youth spent in Tupelo, Mississippi. He is adept on both harmonica and guitar. Isaiah Chattman, 50, was born in the town of Norwood and learned guitar there. From 1936 to 1953 he was employed at an automobile manufacturing plant in Gary, Indiana, where he met and played with Jimmy Reed. He returned south to Baton Rouge and plays there in nightclubs on weekends as a member of Silas Hogan's band. His *Found My Baby Gone* incorporates much of Muddy Waters' *Still a Fool*.

These fifteen performances show that the country blues are far from dead as a creative musical form. Indeed, they display signs of having many more years of healthy life ahead of them.

—David Evans, January, 1968

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, University of California, Los Angeles, through whose support these recordings were made possible.

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Isaiah Chattman

MB

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- Roosevelt Holts and His Friends*, Arhoolie 1057 (Holts, Webb, Quinn).
- Sorrow Come Pass Me Around*, Advent 2805 (Stovall).
- South Mississippi Blues*, Rounder 2009 (Stovall, Quinn, Holts, Jones).
- "Down the Big Road"/"Blues on My Mind," Bluesman 100, by Roosevelt Holts with Boogie Bill (Holts, Webb).

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Photos by Marina Bokelman,
Cheryl Evans and David Evans.

Design: Douglas Parker, Guilford, Vermont