

non J.D. Short content eliminated

J.D. SHORT - Part 3
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In 1973, Sonet issued an LP (SNTF 648) containing ten J.D. Short recordings made by Sam Charters in 1962. These are probably the tracks which were to have appeared on BVLFP 1079, "Sliding Delta", one of three Bluesville LPs which were scheduled by Prestige, but never released because the series was terminated as a result of poor sales. (The other two non-appearing albums were 1078, by Edith Johnson and Henry Brown, and 1080 by George "Hot Cakes" Montgomery.) Altogether fifteen musical recordings from the sessions Charters taped in July, 1962, have now been released. There is no indication of the order in which they were recorded, so I will discuss the Sonet tracks, like the Folkways, in the order in which they appear on the LP.

"Starry Crown Blues" is a particular favourite of mine. The title line probably has a gospel derivation, but the rest of the lyrics are strictly secular. Verse six has a long history, and crops up (in slightly different form) in such diverse blues as Stovepipe No. 1's "Court Street Blues" and Kokomo Arnold's "Backfence Picket Blues".

Yes I believe to my soul, peoples I have a starry crown (x2),

Yes I put shoes on your feet, baby, when your feet was on the cold, cold ground.

You know I bought you hair baby, well when you didn't have none (x2),

Well I got you all fixed up now, woman you want to take to the doggone streets
and run.

Well I ain't no bully now, ain't the baddest man in town (x2),

Well keep on messin' with my little woman, boy I swear I'll tear your doggone
playhouse down.

Yes, go and get ready now, move on the other side of town (x2),

Well keep on messin' with my little woman buddy, swear I'll tear your doggone
playhouse down.

Say her name is Hesther, address ain't never been told (x2),

Well gettin' 'fraid somebody gonna steal my jelly roll.

I'm gonna tear me a picket now, off that doggone backyard fence (x2),

I'm gonna whup that woman of mine, great God until she learns some sense.

Although there is no harmonica on "My Rare Dog" (or should it be "My Red Dog"?), J.D. still uses the flailed guitar accompaniment that he had developed for his one-man band performances, and this speeds up progressively through the recording, until by the guitar break between verses seven and eight he is going at a tremendous lick. In this blues it is the woman who makes the midnight creep, but despite her inconstancy, her man still cares so much for her that he is prepared to forgive and forget.

Oh, early this morning, I heard my rare dog bark (x2),

Well my love is gone away, she visit somewhere in the dark.

Well call your wife, know my baby not around (x2),
You can't hide from me baby, 'cause I ain't gonna let you put me down.

Come on home soon in the morning, 'cause you stayed away all last night (x2),
I want to know from you baby, do you call that treatin' me right?

Well in the wee, wee hours, no one to keep my company (x2),
Well I got the blues about my baby, I'm blue as any man can be.

Hold my hand, I'm really in love with you (x2),
Well you do things to me baby that I never would do to you.

Well I'm just sittin' down wonderin', tryin' to drive away my blues (x2),
Well I got the blues about my baby, *no-one else will do. *and

Well this morning about dawn, ooh, you come walkin' in (x2),
Well you been out makin' love with my old time friend.

I will forgive you baby, if you don't do that again (x2),
Well remember now baby, I always have been your friend.

Unlike most "rediscovered" bluesmen, J.D. did not record new versions of his pre-war blues (one wonders if Charters asked about them), but Sam's sympathetic questioning about old songs prompted J.D. to perform five blues that he learned in his youth; all of them are country blues standards, and among the oldest blues we know, dating back at least to the early years of this century. The first of these is J.D.'s version of "Bout A Spoonful" (mistitled "By The Spoonful" on sleeve and label). The earliest commercial recording of this song was by Papa Charlie Jackson in 1925 (Paramount 12320), under the title "All I Want Is A Spoonful". This 78 probably helped to spread the popularity of a piece already widely known in the South. In contrast to Jackson's fairly lighthearted performance, Charley Patton's June, 1929, recording ("A Spoonful Blues", Paramount 12869) was a tough Delta blues rendition with slide guitar accompaniment. Patton accentuated the violent aspects of the song - "Would you kill my man? Yes, I will. You know I'd kill him, just 'bout a (spoonful)" - evoking the rowdy, sexually charged atmosphere of the country juke. Howlin' Wolf's superb 1960 recording of "spoonful", with Hubert Sumlin on guitar (Chess 1762) is a reworking of the traditional theme by Willie Dixon, introducing lines like "It could be a spoonful of coffee, could be a spoonful of tea, Just a little spoon of your precious love, good enough for me." Wolf's menacing voice, with its echoes of Patton, is ideal for the mood of the song Charlie Jordan recorded a variant entitled "Just A Spoonful" (Vocalion 1543), which has almost nothing in common lyrically with the versions mentioned.

J.D.'s "Spoonful" probably derives from versions that pre-date commercial recording. It has some of the toughness of the Patton variant, but in other respects is closer to the songster versions of Mance Lipscomb ("Bout A Spoonful", Arhoolie F1001, recorded August, 1960) and Mississippi John Hurt ("Coffee Blues" on Vanguard VRS-9220 and VSD-19/20, and Rebel CLPS 1068); these have a slightly gentler feel about them, although the message, "just got to have my lovin' spoonful", is still clear.

The repeated phrase, "sugar my babe" is used in J.D.'s version, like Blind Lemon Jefferson's "doggone my bad luck soul" in "Bad Luck Blues" (Paramount 12443), to impart an insistent quality to the lyrics, in a manner akin to the "hook line" of popular songs.

I'll kill my ma, sugar my babe, about a spoonful, spoonful,
I'll kill my pa, sugar my babe, about a spoonful, spoonful.

It's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful,
It's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful.

It's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful,
It's all I crave, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave.

I'll kill my ma, sugar my babe, about a spoonful,
I'll kill my pa, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave.

It's a spoonful of this, sugar my babe, it's a spoonful of that,
It's a spoonful of this, sugar my baby, that killed the cat.

All I want is a spoonful,
That's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful.

All I crave, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave,
That's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful.

If it's all night long, sugar my babe, just a spoonful (x2).

It's a spoonful of this and a spoonful of that,
It's a spoonful of this, baby, that killed the cat.

It's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful (x2).

Carry me to my grave, carry me to my grave,
'Cos all I want, sugar my babe, is a spoonful.

All last night, all last night, if it's all last night,
I'm worried about it, just a spoonful.

I'll kill my ma, sugar my babe, about a spoonful;
I'll kill my pa, sugar my babe, about a spoonful.

It's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful,
It's all I crave, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave.

It's a spoonful of this and a spoonful of that,
It's a spoonful of this that I sure do like.

It was late last night, sugar my babe, want a spoonful (x3).

All I want, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave,
That's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful.

"You're Tempting Me" uses the same melody as "So Much Wine" (on the Folkways LP), and consists of a series of complimentary remarks about a girl who is "real pigmeat". Most verses are variations on the basic chorus, given below, with the girl variously described as "awful neat", "a real pretty mama", "real kind mama". Lines like "I look in your face, your face seem so sweet" are rare in blues, which usually deals with failed relationships rather than courtship. "If I could just have a little bit-ty talk...take a little walk with you"; the singer is definitely lovesick!

You know, baby, you lookin' awful neat,
You know baby, you look so sweet,
You're tempting me,
Oh, you're tempting me,
You're a fine, beautiful girl,
Oh you're tempting poor me.

In the Sonet LP sleeve notes, Charters suggests that J.D. always performed his songs the same way, but this certainly isn't true of the two versions of "Slidin' Delta" that J.D. recorded. Lyrically the two versions are very different; compare the following transcript with the one I gave in Part 2 from the Asch LP version:

Oh, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
Hear me cryin', I ain't dyin',
Oh, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
It made me think about my baby, oooh yea oooh..

Oh, early this morning, creeping through my door,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Oh, early this morning, crying through my door,
Well I hear that whistle blow and she won't blow here no more.

Oh, slow down train now, bring my babe back home,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Slow down train, bring my babe back home,
Well she been gone so long, ooh, make my poor heart moan.

One thing now, I don't understand,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,

One thing now, I don't understand,
I been nice to my baby, ooh, she gone with another man.

Thought I heard, freight train whistle blow,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Thought I heard, freight train whistle blow,
And she blow just like, weech weech weech..

Oh run here mama, sit down on my knee,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Run here mama, sit down on my knee,
I want to understand now baby, how you treat poor me.

Oh, two trains running now, running side by side,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Two trains running now, running side by side,
Well one of the trains, ooh ooh weech..

Now come on home baby, come to me,
You know I'm lonely as a man can be,
Oh, come on home, come on home to me,
You know I need your lovin' just as a man can be.

In answer to Sam's question, "What is the Sliding Delta?" J.D. stated that it was "an awful slow train (ran) down through Mississippi," and added humourously that "it was so slow that it almost slide like a turtle". He couldn't tell Sam which towns it ran through, having learned the song as a child from older singers. Mississippi John Hurt, who was ten years older than J.D., did know, though. It ran from Greenwood to Grenada, "from main line to main line". Four trains a day ran along this branch line. In his variant (which can be heard on Piedmont PLP 13161, and Vanguard VRS 9181 and VSD 19/20), John also works in the Big Katy Adams, a famous Mississippi steamboat.

The earliest issued recording of "Slidin' Delta" that I'm aware of is that by Tommy Johnson on Paramount 12975 (reissued on Southern Preservation Records SPR2/Flyright LP 114). This was recorded in 1930, when the song was already at least 25 years old. Although J.D.'s two performances are overall very different from Johnson's, there are similarities, notably the falsetto whooping and hollering that both use, and the common first verse.

"I'm Just Wastin' My Time" is a bitter mistreater blues with a "love in vain" verse akin to those of Robert Johnson and Rice Miller. As J.D. comments, "the blues mostly came on account of womens...". The harmonica is absent on this track, and J.D. contrives a rocking guitar accompaniment, with R&B touches and a solid boogie beat.

Told me you love me, told me to my face,
Got someone else in my place.

CHORUS: I'm just wastin' my time, oh wastin' my time,
I'm wastin' my time baby, foolin' around with you.

You do everything, make me feel so sad and blue,
Then you still want me to play in love with you.

CHORUS

Well late last night, half past four,
I come home knockin' on my real good door.

CHORUS

Seem like all my love is all in vain,
You carryin' your love to some other man.

CHORUS

Hand me down your love right now,
Don't mean me no good, I'm goin' somewhere.

CHORUS

Why did you do me like you do?
Do things baby, make me sad and blue.

CHORUS

Well, keep on rollin' across my floor,
You don't want me, why in the world don't you let me know?

CHORUS

Well up so high, down so low,
Now your man surely got to go.

CHORUS

"Red River Blues" must surely be one of the oldest country blues. It has occurred in one form or another throughout the South. The Red River divides Texas from Oklahoma, then bends southwards to flow right across Louisiana before joining the Mississippi River near the Mississippi state line. On the way it passes through Shreveport and Alexandria, Louisiana, and cuts off a corner of Arkansas around Texarkana. The earliest recording of the song referring to it that I know of is that by Henry Thomas (Vocalion 1137, cut in October, 1927); Thomas was known as "Ragtime Texas", and was born in Upstur County in that state in 1874. Probably the song originated in the East Texas area.

Texas songster Mance Lipscomb recorded "Red River Run" for Reprise in 1961 (Reprise 2012). Whereas Thomas used only the basic "Which way do the Red River run? (x3) It run north and south" verse, and a striking "Look where the sun done gone (x3), It's gone God knows where", adding the "all out and down" and "poor boy" verses to complete the song, Mance presents a more developed version: "Which-a-way do Red River run? East, west, then north and south, run by my baby's house", before launching into "I'm goin' to Dallas in the fall", etc.

There are a number of Piedmont variants; by Virgil Childers from North Carolina (on Bluebird B7464, cut in 1938) - "Which-a-way do the blood red river run? Run from my window to the risin' sun"; by Sonny Terry (swapping verses with Alec Seward and Woodie Guthrie on Archive of Folk Music FS-206); by Maryland songster Bill Jackson (Testament T-2201); and by Peg Leg Howell ("Blood Red River" on Testament T-2204). In the main, these versions refer to a red river (the track of the sun through the sky, I have seen it suggested), rather than the Red River, although Bill Jackson's version is specific: "Which-a-way do Red River run? From my back window to the risin' sun. Some say it runs east, some say it runs west, But I believe to my soul it runs straight up and down." Howell even works in the "longest train" and "Joe Brown's coal mine" verses.

Leadbelly's "Red River Blues" (Storyville SLP 124) is slightly different from both the basic Texas and Piedmont versions: "Tell me which-a-way Red River run (x2), Some say it run from sun to sun. Red River is so deep and wide (x2), Say I can't get a letter from the other side. The old folks always tell me it run from east to west (x2), And I always believe that they know the best."

The version of "Red River Blues" that J.D. Short recorded for Sam Charters was titled "The Red River Run", and was apparently learned from a Hollandale, Mississippi, bluesman who went by the name of "Coot". It opens with a stanza very similar to the one used by Henry Thomas, but with the addition of a line not found in any of the variants quoted above. The two references to the Indian Territory in J.D.'s song hark back to the days when Oklahoma was still the land of the Cherokee Indians.

Which-a-way, wich-a-way, do the Red River run?
Which-a-way do Red River run?
Now some say it runs both north and south,
Well I say it run down Indian Territo'.

Now I went to the gypsy, for to have my fortune told,
Well the gypsies all told me, doggone my bad luck soul.

I done walked, I done walked, till my feet got soakin' wet,
Lookin' for my fair brown, I ain't found her yet.

I done walked Red River, I done walked it up and down,
Well, lookin' for my baby, my baby can't be found.

Now your house is on fire, now your building's burnin' down,
I'm goin' to keep on walkin' baby, till I find my teasin' brown.

Which-a-way, which-a-way, do the Red River run?
Which-a-way do Red River run?
Now some say it runs both north and south,
But I say it runs now by my baby's house.

Come on home, come on home, lookin' for you all day long,
But which-a-way do the Red River run?

Come on home, come on home, I need you all night long,
Come on home to me baby, I need you all night long.

Late at night, late at night, no-one to keep my company,
Come on home, come on home baby, I need you up to day.

Which-a-way, which-a-way, do the Red River run?
Well some say it run, now baby, north and south,
When I first left for Indian Territo',
When I said hello to the Indian Territo'...

"Help Me Some" is very similar to the version recorded for Delmar(k), with the third line of the chorus slightly amended to "you sure got to help me some". J.D. omits the "grind my coffee" verse and adds two new ones as verses four and five:

Well I'm callin' you honey, callin' you sugar pie,
I be lovin' you now till the day I die.

Love is a thing that only time can bring,
Love you so much till I just can't explain.

Sam asked J.D. where the music for the blues came from, and Short replied that he thought it came "from the harmony of the old songsters years ago". His comment that it was only in later years that the blues acquired a downbeat, a boogie beat, is most interesting, in that it corresponds with what Blind Willie McTell had to say on the subject when interviewed for the Library of Congress. J.D. dates the first blues he heard to 1908, and Willie mentions this year as the one after which the blues became "original". This is not the place for a discussion of the origin of the blues, but I find it very significant that both McTell and Short dated the appearance of the country blues as a separate musical form to the period 1904-1914. It is also of interest that, in an interview with Frederic Ramsey Jr., included in Leadbelly's "Last Sessions", Huddie Ledbetter dates the beginning of "walking the basses", the downbeat in the blues, to 1904-05.

Charters asked Short if he remembered people singing in the fields, and inquired, after J.D. confirmed that he did, what was the first blues J.D. heard. Short responds with a beautiful unaccompanied version of "East St. Louis Blues".

I walked all the way from East St. Louis today,
Now I did not have but the one old lousy dime.

I done walked, I done walked, till my feet got soakin' wet,
I been lookin' for my baby, I ain't found her yet.

Now your house is on fire, babe your building's burning down,
Now you heard baby, you needed over yonder in town.

"Make Me Down A Pallet On The Floor" is one of the most recorded blues songs, and certainly one of the oldest, a distinction it shares with "Careless Love", "Hesitation Blues" and a few other evergreens, and has been recorded by artists as diverse as Willie Brown, Mama Yancey, Jelly Roll Morton and John Hurt. It was already a country blues standard in the early twenties, and although presumably considered "old hat" by the record companies, who largely ignored the song, it was in the repertoire of most blues performers. Most of the recorded versions have been made in recent years, for example Mississippi John Hurt's uptempo version on Vanguard VRS-9220 (1964), which has a guitar accompaniment strikingly similar to one used by Elizabeth Cotton.

J.D.'s version of "Pallet" is the final track on the Sonet LP, and one of his best performances. The first half consists of versions of the "pallet" verse, while the

second links three related verses, each consisting of one line repeated three times in the fashion of the earliest blues artists (cf. Henry Thomas).

The chorus varies slightly each time, but the basic version runs as follows:

Make me down one pallet on your floor, lawd, lawd, lawd, lawd,
Make me down a pallet on your floor,
Won't you make me down one pallet on your floor,
Oh fix it so your man won't never know.

Honey babe, my back don't never get tired (x2).
Now sugar my babe, my back don't never get tired

Late last night when I come walkin' in (x3).

I found a man hangin' round my gate (x3).

Get my old forty-four and he won't hang there no more (x3).

In the past I have had some rather harsh things to say about certain aspects of Sam Charters' writings on the blues, justifiably I think, but one can have nothing but praise for his efforts in interviewing and recording oldtime bluesmen. In particular I appreciate the way he has kept faith with the artists. It is more than 12 years since J.D. Short died, and but for Sonet giving Charters a free hand in his selection of materials in their "Legacy Of The Blues" series, we would have heard no more of J.D.'s artistry than his handful of prewar recordings, and an equally sparse handful on Delmark, Folkways and Asch. Thanks to Sonet and Charters, we are in possession of a full picture of J.D. Short's work, and a fitting memorial to the music of a great Mississippi blues singer.

(NOTE: This article was written before the Mamlish reissue of a June, 1931, recording of "She's Got Jordan River In Her Hips" (Victor 23288) by R.T. Hanen. The sleeve-note to the Mamlish LP contains the assertion that R.T. Hanen is a pseudonym for J.D. Short and points out that the tune of "She's Got Jordan River In Her Hips" closely resembles that of one of Short's Folkways LP tracks. It seems odd that Short does not play any instrument on this Louisville, Kentucky, recording - the guitar accompaniment is by Clifford Gibson and Roosevelt Sykes is on piano - but vocally it does sound likely that Hanen is Short. "Happy Day Blues", the reverse of the Victor 78, suggests that as "life is so short" everyone ought "to have a happy time before we go".)

BOB GROOM

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