

There is a tendency among some blues writers to disparage the work carried out on behalf of the Folk Song Archive of the Library of Congress, recording blues singers and musicians. They mock the evident enthusiasm for so-called 'folk' material like 'Boll Weevil' and 'John Henry', and scoff that important artists were overlooked while minor figures were given undue attention. The music that has already appeared in this series of compact discs (**Son House** CD02, **Mississippi Blues** CD07 and the two LC tracks by **Bukka White** on CD03) should go a long way to confound any such suggestions, and there is much more where that came from. The 22 tracks on this present disc illustrate the tremendous richness and diversity of the music recorded for the Archive in the Southeastern states – from Virginia, down through the Carolinas and Georgia into Florida.

It is true enough, of course, that these men were encouraged to preserve for posterity their variants of songs such as 'John Henry'. A number of the artists included here did – Allison Mathis, for one, and a fine tough blues setting it was, as you can hear. He also laid down one of the most powerful bottleneck guitar accompaniments to come out of Georgia on his stunning, if heartbreakingly short, 'Mama You Goin To Quit Me Good As I Been To You'. Willie Williams sang 'Boll Weevil Been Here' (not included here) as well as this superb version of 'Red River Runs', in which his vocal cadences occasionally resemble, of all people, Charley Patton.

Two of the artists here also attracted the attention of commercial record companies, albeit later in their careers. Gabriel Brown, whose 'Talking In Sebastopol' is notable, apart from its own considerable merits, for the fact that it was one of the earliest blues recordings by a Florida blues musician, went on to find a successful recording career in post-war New York. His namesake Buster did likewise, providing R&B with one of its most enduring riffs through his hit recording 'Fannie Mae', but in these early days he was already bursting with energy and ideas, as these two harmonica and vocal features demonstrate so effectively. Incidentally, the follow-up to 'Fannie Mae' was none other than a full-blown R&B version of 'John Henry'.

So the commercial companies did not have a monopoly on great music although they too, of course, tapped the same rich veins. The influence of popular recording artists from these states, such as Blind Blake and Buddy Moss, can be heard in the recordings here. The like-named Blind Joe not only picked his guitar in a style reminiscent of Blake, but he showed a comparable melodic approach as well, at least on the evidence of his only two recorded songs. Jimmie Owens, recorded a couple of years later, was a little more up-to-date in that

his one performance here is reminiscent of the work of Buddy Moss, who had succeeded Blake as the Southeast's most influential recording artist in the early '30s. Owens had his own cards to play as well; his voice has a distinctive and very attractive vibrato, and one can only regret that he did not record a great deal more.

While some of the artists included here show that they probably learnt at least some of their music from records, many of the others betray few such signs, and we must conclude that what we are hearing is some individual mix of personal creativity and local tradition. Reece Crenshaw's 'Trouble', for example, is recognisably Southeastern in sound, but it is also a superb demonstration of the artist's own considerable invention and skills as a guitarist. The same could be said of many others of these performances: Jimmie Strothers's superb six-minute 'Goin' To Richmond', probably largely extemporised around its basic theme, Sonny Chestain's idiosyncratic but fascinating working of the standard blues theme 'Poor Boy' and J. Wilson's 'Barrel House Blues', whose burst of walking boogie bass was by no means a commonplace figure among guitarists at this early date. The musicians chose a wide range of different idioms for their self-expression, from Willy Flowers's haunting levee camp holler, through Gus Gibson's frantic train imitation to Robert Davis's lovely, relaxed instrumental dance tune. James Sneed's Washboard Band's piece, despite its title, is closer to the white country music of the period than to ragtime, and it is difficult to pigeon-hole the music of the Smith Band, with its unlikely but somehow most effective combination of a hearty kazoo and a gentle, reflective mandolin. Booker T. Sapps and his companions, though, play hard-driving country blues.

Much of the music on this disc was discovered on field trips by John A. Lomax, his son Alan, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and the black writer and folklorist Zora Neale Thurston; the rest was recorded at competitions held during an annual festival at Fort Valley State College, by John Work, Willis James and Lewis Jones. The listener can make up his or her own mind as to whether it is true that these people were, as one writer has said of the Library Of Congress folklorists: "gathering rather dull renditions of the Southern folk song tradition". I am sure that most will agree that there is no argument.

RAY TEMPLETON

### **Further reading**

Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: the blues tradition in the Southeast*. University of Illinois Press, 1986, ISBN 0 252 01213 5 (USA); Macmillian, 1986, ISBN 0 333 43661 X (UK).

Blind Joe vocal/guitar

Reese Crenshaw vocal/guitar,  
"Cool Breeze" vocal

Robert Davis

Gabriel Brown vocal/guitar,  
Rochelle French guitar

Booker T. Sapps vocal/harmonica,  
Roger Matthews vocal/harmonica,  
Willy Flowers vocal/guitar

Willy Flowers vocal/guitar,  
Booker T. Sapps vocal/harmonica

Jimmie Owens vocal guitar,  
J. Brown guitar

Willie Williams vocal/guitar,  
J. Brown guitar

J. Wilson vocal, J. Brown guitar,  
possibly Willie Williams guitar

Jimmie Strothers vocal/guitar

Allison Mathis vocal/guitar,  
Jesse Stroller harmonica (17 only)

Smith Band: unknown guitar, banjo-  
mandolin, bass, kazoo.

Clifton William Smith led this band.  
He played guitar, banjo and mandolin.

Sonny Chestain vocal/guitar

Gus Gibson vocal/guitar

Buster Brown vocal/harmonica

Sneed's Washboard Band: James Sneed  
vocal/washboard, J. F. Duffy guitar,  
Alvin Sanders guitar

State Penitentiary, Raleigh, North Carolina.  
19 December 1934.

State Prison Farm, Milledgeville, Georgia.  
15 December 1934.

Frederica, Georgia.  
c. 15-22 June 1935.

Eatonville, Florida.  
Late June 1935.

Belle Glade, Florida.  
Late June 1935.

Belle Glade, Florida.  
Late June 1935.

State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.  
31 May 1936.

State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.  
31 May 1936.

State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.  
31 May 1936.

State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.  
14 June 1936.

Georgia, 1941.

Georgia, 1941.

Georgia, 1941.

Georgia, 1941 (track 15) and Fort Valley State  
College, Fort Valley, Georgia 5-7 March 1943  
(track 12).

Fort Valley State College, Fort, Valley, Georgia.  
Between 5 and 7 March, 1943.

Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia.  
Between 5 and 7 March 1943.