Oliver, Paul. 1969. "Froggy Bottom to Buckhead." In The Story of the Blues. Boston : Northeastern University Press. 40-51.

Froggy Bottom to Buckhead

At the time when Tommy Johnson was in the Delta, Henry Sloan was considering leaving Dockery's and Charlie Patton was the undisputed master of the Delta blues, Walter Boyd the self-styled 'King of the Twelve-string guitar players of the world' was going to a dance. He was crossing the river bottoms near New Boston in Bowie County, Texas, close to where the state lines of Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma meet. One of his companions, Alex Griffin, began to kid another, Will Stafford, about his girl. Somehow the guitar-player, Walter Boyd, came into the discussion and Stafford drew a pistol. Boyd was quicker and shot him through the forehead. On December 13, 1917 Walter Boyd, alias Huddie Ledbetter, alias Leadbelly, was charged with murder and assault to kill. Six months later the prisoner, who had already escaped once, was sent to the Shaw State Prison farm with a thirty-year sentence.

Leadbelly was a rough, tough, arrogant man, at least then. No one challenged his skill as a twelve-string guitar player, though his neck and body bore the scars from attacks challenging his claims on women. He was then thirty-three years old and in his prime; he had earlier spent a year on the Harrison County chain gang for assaulting a woman and, when he escaped, had assumed the name of Walter Boyd to avoid re-arrest. In the preceding years he had led an eventful, violent life and absorbed every kind of ballad, reel and folk song. Like his contemporary, Henry Thomas, and Mance Lipscomb, ten years or so his junior, Leadbelly was a songster, and he had the songster's pride in the breadth of his repertoire. He had been born some thirty miles from Shreveport, near the Caddo Lake, in 1885. His father bought sixty-eight acres of land when Huddie was ten; he grew up to the smell of the brushwood burning in the lake bottoms.

Jim Fagin and Bud Coleman were the old-time guitarists from

whom he learned the first rudiments of his music and even as a boy he carried a Colt revolver to the country 'breakdowns' in the bottom-lands, along with his guitar. He was envied for his sexual prowess which he exercised at the age of sixteen in the notorious joints of Fannin Street, hung on the side of a steep hill in Shreveport's red light district. It was there he heard the 'barrel-house' piano players whose use of heavy 'walking bass' figures was the inspiration for the powerful rhythms which he employed in his songs. Leadbelly sang and played every kind of theme that he heard in his restless life, from cowboy songs like *Old Chisholm Trail*, ballads like the popular Texas theme of *Ella Speed* to children's game songs, ox-and mule-driver's hollers and low-down blues. The man who taught him, more than any other, to sing the blues was Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Blind instrumentalists play a large part in the story of the blues. Unable to make a living handling the plough or the hoe, they frequently resorted to music, with an extra sensibility from their deprivation of another sense and with the time in which to practice frequently making them among the foremost of singers. Lemon Jefferson was born in 1897 near Wortham, Texas between the Trinity and the Navasota rivers about eighty miles south of Dallas. It is sad and wasted country today but then it was good farming country in the Texas cotton belt. In Jefferson's blues there are so many references to sight that it seems likely that he was partially sighted at birth, even if he was unable to join his brothers and sisters in the fields. He must have heard them, picked a little cotton perhaps, for his voice was coloured with the cries of the field-hands and the intonations of the work songs. He was still a youth when he was playing on the streets of Wortham for coin, and he was independent enough to forgo having anyone to lead him. Leadbelly once claimed to have known Lemon in Dallas in 1904; on another occasion he claimed to have known him for eighteen years. Both seem unlikely but undoubtedly during the years before his arrest Leadbelly and Lemon did meet and, for a sustained period, they sang together in the bars of Dallas and on the steps of the railroad terminals. Sometimes they travelled to Silver City, a rough haunt now forgotten where there were 'lots of pretty girls', as he once explained. 'We like for women to be aroun' cause when women's aroun' that bring mens and that bring money. Cause when you get out there the women get to drinkin' . . . that thing fall over them, and that make us feel good and we tear those guitars all to pieces.'

A large-built man who ran to fat, Blind Lemon's full features barely hint at the sensitivity of his singing, but seated defiantly and unseeingly

before a camera he revealed something of his independence. When he sang it was with a deep pathos, a feeling that stemmed from the being of a man forever in darkness. His voice was high, lean and had a cutting edge that severed pretence and bared the soul. With a natural command of nuance, he employed a range of vocal devices, striking a note with unerring accuracy, soaring up to it, letting his voice swell and fade, falling in cadence like a train whistle at night. Unlike that of Mississippi bluesmen, Lemon's singing, close to the holler, did not have an insistent beat; instead he would suspend the rhythm or hold a note to emphasise a word or line. By 'hammering' on the strings – using a quick release which produced a succession of open and fretted notes – by choking the strings and by dextrously picked arpeggios, Lemon used rapid phrases which extended the vocal line. For him the guitar was another voice and he frequently used imitative phrases – the rapid chatter of needles for the unexpected line 'I've got a gal 'cross town, she crochet all the time.' His words were almost always autobiographical:

> I stood on the corner and almost bust ma head (2)
> I couldn't earn enough to buy me a loaf of bread.
>
> Now gather roun' me people, let me tell you true facts, (2)
> That tough luck has struck me and the rats is sleepin' in my hat.

But sometimes he would project himself into another man's situation with rare poetic insight; as when he sang on *Hangman's Blues*:

> The mean old hangman is waitin' to tighten up that noose (2)
> Lord I'm so scared I'm tremblin' in my shoes.
>
> The crowd aroun' the courthouse an' the time is drawin' fast (2)
> Soon a good-for-nothin' killer is goin' to breathe his last.

Many of Jefferson's unusual turns of phrase passed into blues lore – 'I got somethin' to tell you make the springs cry on your bed', 'I'm standin' here wondrin' will a match-box hold ma clo's?' 'I walked from Dallas, I walked to Wichita Falls'. Leadbelly learned from *Black Snake Moan* which exemplified Lemon's style. Sang Jefferson, with vivid sexual imagery (Music Example 5).

> Eeeeeheh, ain't got no mama now (2)
> She tol' me late last night 'You don't need no mama nohow'
>
> Mmmm-mm, black snake crawlin' in my room (2)
> And some pretty mama better get this black snake soon.

> Oohoo, that must've been a bed bug, you know a chinch
> cain't bite that hard, (2)
> Ask my woman for fifty cents, she said 'Lemon, ain't a
> child in the yard'
>
> Well – wonder where that black snake's gone (2)
> Lord that black snake mama, done run my darlin' home.

Each line of Lemon's vocal would be answered by a fragment on the guitar – a simple phrase or a rapid arpeggio, but on this blues he did not accompany himself while singing, and suspended the beat for the verse. In Jefferson's blues the old leader-and-chorus form of call and response was echoed in the construction of vocal and answering phrase. This was a form used by a number of Texas blues singers, who worked in Dallas at much the same time.

Dallas in the early part of the century had a rapidly expanding black population, in 1900 around ten thousand, which doubled in a score of years. A considerable shift in the population occurred through the voracious pest, the boll weevil, whose devastation of the cotton crop at the turn of the century had put many Negro farmers out of work. It first appeared in Texas in the 1890s. By 1905 it had also ravaged crops in Mississippi and caused widespread disaster. Incoming Texas Blacks concentrated in the run-down areas of Dallas and desperately sought employment or lived off the women, who could still get work as domestic help to the Dallas rich.

> I been walkin' all day, an' all night too (2)
> Cause my meal ticket woman have quit me and I can't
> find no work to do.
>
> I pickin' up the newspaper an' I lookin' in the ads, (2)
> An, the policeman come along an' he 'rested me for vag.

'Boys you ought to see me in my black and white suit,' commented the singer, Rambling Thomas, drily. He was one of the Texas arpeggio school of guitarists, working from Dallas to Shreveport. Shreveport had half its population Black and, since Leadbelly was there, had a flourishing blues tradition. Many Shreveport singers made the trip along Highway 80 to Dallas and were to be found gathering in the Central Tracks region, along the railroad lines near Elm Street. Here could be heard Rambling Thomas, Blind Lemon, Texas Alexander and even Lonnie Johnson. Lonnie Johnson came from New Orleans, where he was born in 1899. In spite of the popular view, New Orleans has not had an important part to play in the story of the blues, the

transition there being from the songs of the field and the dance into jazz. One of a large and talented family, Lonnie worked in a lumber yard, but from childhood played guitar, fiddle and a little of other instruments. He travelled to England with a stock company to entertain the troops in 1917 but the decimation of his family, probably by the Spanish 'flu epidemic, saw him rambling through Texas and up to St Louis. He had a smooth and accomplished guitar technique, too polished and jazz-inflected for the rougher forms of blues, but his musical skill made him popular with the record companies. In Dallas he represented the 'professional' singer and was chosen to accompany Texas Alexander.

Alger Alexander was a field hand and a rugged man who saw much of the inside of the Texas penitentiary system. He did not play an instrument but only sang – a personal, tweed-textured holler which did not employ falsettos but moaned in long, sad cadences. Lonnie Johnson followed with slow finger-picked notes, uncertain where Alexander's freely-formed blues might take him. They were frequently transpositions of the songs Alexander sang in the levee camp and on the section gang:

> Oh nigger lick molasses, and the white man licks 'em too
> Oh I wonder what in the worl' is this mess' gang gonna do?
> Oh nigger lick molasses and the white man licks 'em too.
>
> 'Water boy, water boy, bring your water round
> If you ain't got no water, let your bucket down
> Water boy, water boy, bring your water round.'
>
> 'Oh capt'n, capt'n, what time of day . . . ?'
> Oh he looked at me . . . and he walked away.

His blues concluded with the low humming moan which often ended his syllables. To the renters and 'croppers who had left the farms and bottom land plantations for the city, the voices of Blind Lemon, Rambling Thomas or Texas Alexander were singing for them, sharing their own experience and predicament. Crowds would cluster round them on Central Tracks and the coins would clatter – nickels and dimes – in their hats and tin cups. Money was scarce, and few Blacks owned property. Small denominations passed hands for home-brewed liquor and as winnings in street-corner crap games, or paid admission for a party. In the 'chock-houses', where a crude form of alcohol cost a matter of cents, pianists hit the keys in a rough-and-ready combination of ragtime and blues: 'barrelhouse', as it was called, after the rudest of joints where barrels supported a

plank for a bar. Alexander Moore was one, born in Dallas in 1899 and making a living during the day by leading his mule-drawn junk cart; at night he rolled out the blues in the innumerable bars and joints down in the Froggy Bottom, where his words reflected the violent life of the population and the folkways of the people from the country.

> I shot at my woman because I was tired of so much
>   bull corn (2)
> I said policeman jumped me, run me like a rabbit from
>   a burnin' barn.
>
> She had red flannel rags, talkin' 'bout hoodoin' po' me (2)
> I believe I'll go to Froggy Bottom so she will let me be.

The vast expanse of Texas is divided into broad strips, the piney woods and the tangled, primitive undergrowth of the Big Thicket giving way to the bottom lands of the cotton-growing, farming districts of the Trinity, the Navasota and the Brazos Rivers. Beyond the blacklands strip, from San Antonio to Fort Worth, extend the Great Plains. This area had been slowly opened up to cotton cultivation and singers like Texas Alexander followed the migrant workers into West Texas for the cotton-picking harvest. But the bulk of Texas blues singers were to be found in the eastern third of the state, still an immense area, which largely concealed a rich variety of traditions, little recorded and little researched, but represented on record by such singers as Gene Campbell, Little Hat Jones and Funny-paper Smith. It's about 180 miles to Shreveport or Texakarna from Dallas, nearly 250 miles to Houston and still further to San Antonio. In the mid- and late-1920s when the first recordings of the southern blues forms were being made, only a small number of location recordings were made in San Antonio; the rest were in Dallas. As the talent scouts tended to draw on the available material or came from the Chicago and New York headquarters by rail for brief periods of 'getting up talent', the recorded examples are a heavily conditioned picture of the blues at the time.

This problem applies not only to Texas, of course, but elsewhere in the states of the South; later, some discussion of the recording patterns will be made but it's sufficient to mention at the moment that Shreveport was almost half-way between Dallas and Jackson, Mississippi, and Jackson was as close to Shreveport as it was to Memphis – 220 miles. But it was nearly 250 miles from Jackson to

Montgomery or Birmingham, Alabama, whereas the average distance of these cities from Atlanta, Georgia was around 160 miles. For the recording men on their infrequent field trips, Memphis, Dallas and Atlanta were adequate centres. With talent scouts in each centre, and one placed in Jackson, they had the south 'covered' – for the commercial business of supplying enough talent for recording. But the outcome of this was that Alabama was largely neglected by the location recording units and even by the talent scouts, their best-known singers from Alabama having either moved to Chicago or to Atlanta, Georgia. Alabama's grinding poverty scarcely permitted the conditions in which the blues could move from the field holler to a recreational and, to some extent, performance art. In many ways Alabama, like Arkansas or the Sea Islands, was too primitive and too under-developed to have made this transition and its folkways were of the plantation kind. The cultural entity that isolation permitted to remain intact in the Sea Islands did not survive the fragmentation of divided, stratified, segregated black life in Alabama. Between 1915 and 1916 a large number of work songs, gang labour songs and blues fragments were noted in manuscript collections in Auburn, Monroe County, Alabama, and in adjacent areas. They were published a dozen years later by Newman Ivey White and they show that the blues, of a field holler kind or in work song form was commonly heard. Forty years after the notes were made, the field trips of Harold Courlander and Frederic Ramsey Jr showed the blues in a similar state, with many of the older song traditions which had otherwise largely disappeared, fading but still intact. Their recordings suggest a retardation of the processes which formed the blues elsewhere.

A singer who came from Alabama to Atlanta, Georgia, was Barefoot Bill, raised in Greenville, south of Montgomery, who had a hard, shouted tone in his singing. Barefoot Bill seems to have been obsessed with themes of crime and punishment, half his recorded blues have some reference to violence. His voice dropped in a series of long steps from a highish opening note which had an immediate attack and little or no inflection. Against the stark vocal he played a rhythmic pattern which had a train-like impetus, the alternate bass and treble notes giving a syncopated lift to the movement of the blues. Coming from a region lying between Mississippi and Georgia, Barefoot Bill appears to display some qualities in common with the singers from both of the better documented regions. But this is probably an illusion, supported by the chance evidence of a few recorded sides. There is, incidentally, some indication that he lived in Atlanta for several years and if this were the case he could have been under some influence from the major singers in the region.

Atlanta, Georgia, was an important early recording location and was singularly well-chosen. Not only did it occupy geographically a strategic position for access to a large part of the rural South, it had also witnessed an astonishing growth rate, attracting people from the rural areas over a sustained period. The black population was concentrated on the west side of the city and to the south-west with large areas having over nine-tenths of their population 'colored'. There were over 35,700 Blacks in Atlanta in 1900 and in ten years they had increased by sixteen thousand; there were ten thousand more by 1920 and after the War a further dramatic increase occurred so that by 1930 the population exceeded ninety thousand. This meant that a rapid influx of rural Blacks to the city had kept the folkways alive and also easily accessible. It should be noted in passing that Birmingham, Alabama, had a population less than half that of Atlanta in 1900 but had exceeded it by 1930 – the availability of talent is not necessarily reflected in what is known about the music of the state. In Birmingham a third of the total black male population were labourers; in Atlanta the number was less – a quarter of the total, and a larger proportion could obtain work in service jobs. This meant that there was a little more money to be dropped into the tin cups of the street singers, a little more time to develop a musical skill to a point where a man might even earn a living by entertaining as a blues singer or songster. But it was a strictly segregated society – on the heights of the bald dome of Stone Mountain the Ku Klux Klan burned their flaming crosses, held their Klonventions and cruelly, brutally maimed and castrated Blacks who they considered were getting 'uppity'. On Decatur Street or Auburn Avenue however, the Klan seemed remote. These were the 'main stem' in Atlanta's segregated sector, bright, colourful with the lights of theatres, the music of the joints and the jostling crowd around Shorter's Barber Shop. Here the bluesmen gathered, here Peg Leg Howell would sing to the passers-by and the crowds queuing outside Bailey's 81 Theatre.

Joshua Barnes Howell was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in March 1888, the son of a Putnam County farmer. He worked on the farm until 1916 when he was shot in the leg by his brother-in-law during an argument. His leg had to be amputated and he was unable to do the heavy farm work; he got a job instead at the local fertilizer plant, though this could have been little easier. By the time he was thirty-five, he was tired of the country and moved to Atlanta hoping to make a living out of his guitar playing, singing, and selling

moonshine whiskey. It was the latter business that cost him a year in prison in 1925, but at least it provided him with the theme for a blues. 'Peg Leg', as he was called, adapted the songs he had heard in the field. 'I learned many of my songs around the country', he told George Mitchell, 'I picked them up from anybody – no special person. Mostly they just sang, didn't play anything.' He had learned to play the guitar himself in 1909 – 'didn't take long to learn. I just stayed up one night and learned myself.' His blues are of special interest because they clearly represent the transition from old songs, work songs and ballads, to blues. His *Rolling Mill Blues* derived from the white mountain song *To the Pines*, his *Skin Game Blues* was based on the falls of the 'pikers' in playing the gambling game of 'Georgia Skin', and others had verses that link with many old themes. How confused and probably irreclaimable the origins of traditional blues themes may be is indicated by some of the verses in Peg Leg Howell's blues. From *Rock and Gravel Blues*:

> Honey, let's go to the river and sit down, (2)
> If the blues overtake us, jump overboard and drown.
>
> It take rocks, it takes gravel, to make a solid road (2)
> It takes a lovin' fair brownie to satisfy my soul.

or from *Turtle Dove Blues*:

> I weep like a willer, moan like a turtle dove (3)
> Said life ain't worth livin' if you ain't with the one you love.
>
> If I had wings like Noah's turtle dove, (3)
> I would rise and fly, 'light on the one I love.

– can be gleaned verses which were collected by John A. Lomax from a woman named 'Dink' who was working with her man in a levee camp on the Brazos River, Texas, having come there in a team imported from Mississippi, a year or two before Peg Leg Howell had begun to play guitar.

It is apparent from many blues that there are currents which flow in regional traditions that are not shared elsewhere, but others show a cross-fertilisation which makes disentanglement almost impossible. Peg Leg Howell's *Rolling Mill Blues* has its counterpart in Charlie Lincoln's *Chain Gang Trouble*, suggesting that *To the Pines* was very much a local theme. But Lincoln's blues has the 'Capt'n' verses of the chain gang which have been collected throughout the south and, as

has been shown, appear in the singing of Texas Alexander. Convicts wearing stripes and shackled in gangs were leased for plantation, construction and road work. Lincoln's song with its single line verse has, in its sad tones, the authentic sound of the road gang.

> The train run off nine miles from town and killed li'l Lula dead
> Her head was found in the drivin' wheel, her body have never been seen.
>
> I cried, I moaned, I cried I moaned, I asked 'How Long, How Long.'
>
> I asked my Capt'n for the time o' day
> Then he throwed his watch away.
>
> How Long, How Long, How long 'fore I can go home . . .
>
> I rise with the blues and I work with the blues
> Nothin' I can get but bad news.

Charlie Lincoln (or Hicks) had a rich voice with a rough complaining voice, somewhat blurred and indistinct. Howell's solo recordings were accompanied with a delicately phrased guitar but Lincoln's were powerful and full-toned. Unlike a number of the Atlanta singers, Howell played a six-string instrument; Lincoln, like his brother, Barbecue Bob, favoured the big twelve-string. He did not play it as Leadbelly had done with a full and resonant thrumming of the strings but with a combination of the swelling bass and clear treble which the instrument can also offer. Leadbelly tuned his guitar with the top three pairs of strings in unison, the fourth and fifth pairs an octave apart and the sixth pair two octaves apart; the Atlanta guitarists probably used the more standard practice of tuning with the top two pairs in unison and the remaining four pairs in octaves. It is necessary to tune a twelve-string much lower than a six-stringed instrument but Leadbelly's tuning was exceptionally low, and much lower than that of Lincoln and Barbecue Bob. The higher tuning, while still retaining the sonorous notes of the bass strings, enabled them to use bottle-neck or brass ring on the top string – often on the first of the top pair only – with a stimulating contrast of light, whining notes against driving bass rhythms. This effect delighted the brothers who recorded a couple of two-part themes, *It Won't Be Long Now* and a 'hokum' *Darktown Gamblin'* in which the exhilarating effect of the twenty-four strings of their two instruments and their deep, brassy voices singing in unison can be heard.

Raised in a farming district, Lithonia, twenty-odd miles from Atlanta, the two brothers came to the city in 1920. Robert Hicks was eighteen years old, his brother was a few years his senior. Though Charlie had a little more experience and taught his brother to play guitar when he was still a boy, his own work was a shade rougher and deeper. Robert's playing was a little more proficient but they both cultivated a style where the accompaniment fell into patterns of rhythm and treble bottle-neck, broken by fractional pauses. In Atlanta, Robert got employment as a yard-hand and later worked as a janitor at the Biltmore Hotel. In the mid-'twenties, both brothers were cleaning car windscreens and serving barbecue'd ribs at a drive-in stand in the comfortable suburb of Buckhead. It was there that they were heard by Dan Hornsby and invited to record, with Robert making his first title in 1927 as 'Barbecue Bob', and calling it *Barbecue Blues*. It had the slightly aggressive, confident manner of all his sides, and underlying it, an elusive bitterness.

> Woke up this mornin' gal, twixt midnight and day (2)
> With my hand on my piller where my brownie used to lay.
>
> I know I ain't good-lookin', teeth don't shine like
> pearls (2)
> So glad good looks don't take you through this worl'.
>
> Gon' starch my jumper mama, iron my overalls (2)
> My brown done quit me; God knows she had it all.
>
> I'm gonna tell you now gal; like t' gypsy tol' the Jew (2)
> If you don't want me – it's a cinch I don't want you . . .

Both brothers lived fast and carelessly; the smiling Barbecue Bob died only a few months after his last recordings were made, at the age of twenty-nine; his brother went to prison soon after, dying there in 1963, his long sentence almost certainly being for murder. Their form of blues was the influence on the obscure Willie Baker and the better-known Curley Weaver. The latter soon teamed up with another Atlanta singer, Blind Willie McTell, who made his name in the 'thirties. Like Charlie Patton or Tommy Johnson in Mississippi, or Blind Lemon Jefferson and Texas Alexander in Texas, these were the men who gave shape to the Georgia brand of blues and impressed its sounds in wax. One may lay undue emphasis on the recorded singers and omit those who might have been more influential, more important in those localities never visited by the talent scouts. Their approaches to their music could have been very different and equally

individual. But the recorded singers are representative, and they have left sufficient testimony to their originality and creativity to assure us of their significance in the story of the blues.

It is easy to speak of the intensity of the Mississippi singers, the high and lonely, relaxed singing of the Texas bluesmen or the confident assertiveness of the Georgia artists. The broad generalisations may have an element of truth; detailed study reveals the subtler shades within the cruder colours of the blue end of the spectrum. If Barbecue Bob and Charlie Lincoln, Curley Weaver or Willie McTell were less introverted than the Texas singers in their blues, the general principle does not hold for Peg Leg Howell. At least – not in his blues. When he was singing other kinds of song, Peg Leg was the most extrovert of entertainers. Blues is a means whereby a man may give expression to his feelings, but it is also entertainment, and if blues is that which blues singers care to sing, then Peg Leg Howell – and his Gang – indicate another strain in a varied music.