

Paul Oliver, "Hard Time Everywhere," in *The Story of the Blues*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1969. 105-116.

Hard Time Everywhere

'Who first thought of getting out Race records for the Race? Okeh, that's right. Genuine Race artists make genuine Blues for Okeh . . . It's a cheerful day, folks for everybody,' bragged the General Phonograph Corporation when it published the *Blue Book of Blues* to introduce the singers on the Okeh label. Ralph Peer, recording manager to the firm, who had already conceived the term 'Hillbilly', admitted in 1938 that the company had 'records by all foreign groups: German records, Swedish records, Polish records, but we were afraid to advertise Negro records, so I listed them as "Race" records and they are still known as that.' How Perry Bradford persuaded Fred Hager to record Mamie Smith instead of Sophie Tucker singing his compositions *That Thing Called Love* and *You Can't Keep a Good Man Down* is a much retold story, especially by Bradford himself. He had 'greased my neck with goose grease every morning, so it would come easy to bow and scrape to some recording managers', he claimed in his autobiography but the important thing was that an African American woman had at last, in February 1920, been recorded. Sales were phenomenal, and secured for her another recording date in August that year when *Crazy Blues*, a Bradford composition on a traditional theme, was made. Mamie Smith, said Alberta Hunter, 'made it possible for all of us, with her recording of *Crazy Blues*, the *first* blues record.'

Okeh's success with Mamie Smith's initial issues, which were selling 75,000 copies a month, encouraged other record firms to employ black talent. In August 1920 the Arto firm recorded Lucille Hegamin, in March the following year Lillyn Brown recorded for Emerson and in May Alberta Hunter made her first sides for Black Swan, a short-lived company operated by black partners Harry Pace and W. C. Handy. In September 1921 Columbia followed with Edith

Wilson, still making no departure from the established principle that 'Blues' was sung by women vaudeville and jazz entertainers. Though the majority of these singers were southern-born, they brought little blues feeling to the songs which were 'composed' blues written by Perry Bradford, Clarence Williams, Spencer Williams and other professional writers. The companies addressed the audiences as they considered appropriate: 'we're tellin' you there's none finer or grander when it comes to warblin' mean and hot low-down ravagin' Blues until you don't know whether your sensations is your wigglin' spine or if your spine has got the wigglin' blues,' was the claim for Sara Martin.

It was not until Bessie Smith's recording of *Down Hearted Blues* in February 1923 that the authentic voice of the blues was heard on record. The composition was one which had been recorded by Alberta Hunter with her pianist Lovie Austin and Bessie Smith's version was deliberately designed to 'cut' her. Throughout her recording career Bessie Smith took the songs that had been made famous by other women singers and made vastly superior ones herself; it seems to have been a weakness in her personality that she always had to reassure herself of her own stature by 'carving' other singers. Only once did she apply her ruthless technique to 'Ma' Rainey and then she made *Moonshine Blues* and *Bo Weevil Blues*, the two themes that Rainey considered her 'signature tunes'. On this occasion she did fail to exceed her rival. Ma Rainey first recorded in the December of that year for Paramount, who had earlier made titles with two other southern women blues singers – Lottie Beaman and Lucille Bogan. She recorded prolifically with the company until 1928; Bessie Smith remained with Columbia until 1931. But though these major 'Classic' singers were extensively recorded, the potential of the southern rural singers, and particularly the male blues guitarists and pianists was slow in being recognised. As early as November 1923 Sylvester Weaver had made a few soli on guitar and in April the following year a *Barrel House Blues* was made in Atlanta by one Ed Andrews, singing and playing guitar. Yet it was not until August 1924 that Papa Charlie Jackson, the minstrel-show ragtime banjo player from New Orleans, opened up the market by recording his *Papa's Lawdy Lawdy Blues* and *Airy Man Blues* (actually, 'Hairy man'). There was a veiled sexual implication in the latter title; the next recording, *Salt Lake City Blues* was even more daring. Salt Lake City was Mormon, and Blacks, as was well-known, were unwelcome.

Goin' back to Salt Lake City, ain't no place for me (2)
Goin' back to Salt Lake City where the women won't
let me be.

You have a wife in the mornin', Lord a wife at night (2)
And always a substitute to take her place (if) she's out
of sight.

I'm leavin' here tonight if I have to ride the blinds (2)
Take a freight train special, tell the engineer 'Lose no time'.

Now the jinx all on me all over this town (2)
That's the reason why I'm Salt Lake City bound.

Papa Charlie Jackson was available in Chicago to make recordings of the Southern blues. But Paramount, 'The Popular Race Record' label operated by the New York Recording Laboratory, an improbable subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company, was intent on getting new talent. 'There is always room for more good material and more talented artists,' it stated, introducing J. Mayo Williams, its black Recording Manager, and soliciting suggestions. Paramount's recording conditions were primitive, its record surfaces deplorable, but it discovered through its talent scout Arthur Laibley and others, folk blues singers of outstanding calibre. They were brought to Chicago and thence to Port Washington, Wisconsin, to record, but when Okeh and Columbia sought authentic blues talent, they employed scouts to seek out the artists and arrange for them to be on location – in St Louis, Memphis, Dallas, Atlanta, or New Orleans according to the tour. Columbia's tours commenced in November 1926 when Peg Leg Howell was first recorded and ceased with the last of Barbecue Bob's 56 recorded titles, when the effect of the Depression was felt, late in 1930.

It is obvious that many factors conditioned the availability of singers in the South – the recording units stayed only a few days in any of the principal cities on their tour and did not return for another year or so. With the reluctance of some to record, the unreliability of others, the taste and selection methods of the talent scouts – Dan Hornsby in Atlanta, R. T. Ashford in Dallas or H. C. Speir in Jackson, Mississippi, for example – the factors which decided whether an artist was ever heard on record or not were manifold. But to the talent scouts must go the credit for having discovered so many blues singers in the periods when they were being largely neglected by the folk-lorists. All the major recording blues singers of the 'twenties were located in the space of five years. Blind Lemon Jefferson was

first recorded in 1926, Texas Alexander in 1927, Tommy Johnson in 1928, Charley Patton in 1929, Willie Brown and Son House in 1930. Jefferson's records sold in great numbers and revealed the extent of the southern market. He was, moreover, exceptionally talented, with a gift for original composition. From the recording point of view this was important for there was a demand for 'new' blues rather than repetitions of old ones. Even a singer like Tommy Johnson used a limited repertoire of traditional verses which he re-arranged when he sang. In performance this may hardly have mattered; on record it could have been spread very thinly indeed. Jefferson had the advantage also of having recorded first relatively 'early', i.e. in 1926, and had built up a large and appreciative audience. What might have happened in the 'thirties: whether his appeal would have faded or whether he could have adapted himself to changing tastes remains totally conjectural – for in 1930 Blind Lemon died of a heart attack in a snowstorm in Chicago. 'My friends,' preached Reverend Emmett Dickinson in a remarkable recorded sermon on the *Death of Blind Lemon* soon after, 'Blind Lemon Jefferson is dead, and the world today is in mourning over this loss. So we feel, our loss is Heaven's gain. Big men, educated men and great men, when they pass on to their eternal home in the sky – they command our respects. But when a man that we truly love for the kindness and inspiration they have given us in our upper-most hearts pass on to their rewards we feel there is a vacancy in our hearts that will never be replaced.'

Blues singers of the stature of Blind Lemon Jefferson became the new black folk heroes through the recording medium. Phonographs like the 1920s model Victor Talking Machine brought their voices into private homes. Recording had become the communication medium for African Americans both literate and illiterate. Though the *Defender* and the *Amsterdam News* reached large audiences, the blues records conveyed the feelings and experiences of ordinary men. It may appear that too much importance is laid on the recorded singer, and for the analysis of local traditions this is undoubtedly true. But the record industry brought the blues into countless homes, made the names of singers familiar in households; their music was shared for dancing and entertainment by countless thousands who might never see or hear them personally, and the content of the blues lyrics spoke for the black masses.

'Favorite hits you will enjoy,' ran the legend over such titles as *'Lectric Chair Blues* and *See That My Grave is Kept Clean* with no apparent humour intended. 'Whether you go on a "Blue Monday" or a joy-full Saturday night you'll find here exactly the record to

please you, made just as carefully, and wonderfully, as all other Victor Records are – and by members of your own Race. And nobody needs to tell you that *they know how*,' a supplement advertising Tommy Johnson's *Maggie Campbell Blues* and the Memphis Jug Band's *Bob Lee Junior Blues* appealed. 'Blues that seem to know just how you feel,' ran the legend advertising Blind Willie McTell's *Mamma, Tain't Long Fo' Day*. Patronising they might appear, but six years had passed since *Mama Whip, Mama Spank; Sax-O-Phoney Blues* or *I Want a jazzy kiss* were being sung by Lucille Hegamin and Mamie Smith and the companies had a much clearer idea of what the black market wanted. Paramount Records asked for suggestions; they sold records by mail order. Victor tried crude caricature to advertise. Vocalion gave coupons with Memphis Minnie records, which could be exchanged for a portable phonograph.

But the market was really an illusion – there were many markets and the companies were trying to meet them all. In the most rural areas travelling salesmen were marketing victrolas and table model phonographs maintaining an after-sales service of records; in the cities the drug-stores and furniture stores sold the discs and lines formed outside them as the new releases appeared. So it was possible to meet local needs and increasing confidence was being placed in local black distributors – men like Jesse Johnson in St Louis, who was married to blues singer Edith Johnson and who operated the De Luxe Music shop. He was enterprising enough to hire a plane to shower leaflets announcing the latest issues on the baseball crowds and kept an eye open for fresh talent. It was possible to sell discs of locally recorded artists in their home districts, but outside their immediate areas there were problems – sometimes the extreme parochialism of the singers and their blues made them of little interest in other districts or in the North.

Newly arrived migrants provided a special market and one that became increasingly important. They required both a reminder of their home background and reassurance in their new and unfamiliar environment. They wanted to feel in touch with their friends and at the same time be urban and sophisticated. Lonnie Johnson was the sort of singer who met their needs. He had won the talent contest for blues singers organised by Jesse Johnson in St Louis in 1925 which earned him a seven-year contract with Okeh. His command of a number of instruments and unending stream of blues themes made him an ideal recording artist, while his clean, limpid guitar and sweet-toned voice with a Louisiana vibrato had the fortunate combination of southern inflections with an urbane, disarming

delivery. Lonnie's blues were sometimes arch, often insinuating and occasionally straightforward and sincere. His shrewd appraisal of his audiences enabled him to offer a *double-entendre* song with panache but, when he wished, he could compose a blues of immediate relevance and social content.

I want to go back to Helena, the high water's got me barred, (2)
I woke up early this mornin', high water all in my backyard.

They want me to work on the levee I had to leave my home, (2)
I was so scared the levee might break, Lord and I may drown.

The police run me from Cairo all through Arkansas, (2)
Then put me in jail, behind those cold iron bars.

The police they say 'work, fight or go to jail', I say 'I ain't
totin' no sack' (2)
And I ain't buildin' no levee, the planks is on the ground, and I ain't
drivin' no nails.'

He made eight recordings on the theme of floods.

In 1927 Lonnie Johnson came to Chicago but he was soon on tour again, travelling as far as Texas and then making his way north once more to Cleveland, Ohio. In 1929 he settled in Chicago and attempted to make a living working in night clubs. The Depression interrupted his career and for five years he worked in coal mines, on the railroad and in a steel-mill, but resumed his club work as soon as he was able to secure employment. His style of singing did not change substantially and, though in his sixties he recorded little, he probably had a longer active career than any other blues singer.

A singer with a career on record almost as long as Lonnie Johnson's was Tampa Red. As a young man he was billed as 'The Guitar Wizard' and his deft use of the slide and clear, ringing tones merited the description. Tampa Red was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1904, but his childhood was mainly spent in Tampa, Florida. His name was Hudson Woodbridge, but he took the name of his grandmother, Whittaker. Like many singers of his generation he was in Chicago by the mid-'twenties and trying to earn some money on the side from his guitar playing. His break came when he worked a short stint with Ma Rainey and made his first acquaintanceship with Georgia Tom Dorsey. Thomas A. Dorsey was born near Atlanta in 1899 and as a lanky youth learned to play piano from listening to a number of unrecorded pianists in the city, whom he remembered as Soap Stick,

Nome Burkes, Long Boy, Lark Lee and Charlie Spann. Playing for suppers and Saturday night functions, he was earning as much as \$1.50 for a night's work – quite a lot for a pianist even if it hardly kept him eating. When he was about nineteen he moved to Gary, Indiana, to work in the steel mills but, weighing less than nine stone, he was scarcely able to cope with the work and instead built up a small band and played increasingly for parties. In Georgia he was 'Barrel House Tom'; now he was 'Georgia Tom' but though his music was blues he joined the Pilgrim Baptist church and took lessons in composing and arranging. After a spell in Chicago with Les Hite's Whispering Syncopators he joined Ma Rainey, organised her band for her, and with Ed Pollack on trumpet and Al Wynn on trombone, took it on tour.

One of Ma Rainey's last recording sessions, in September 1928, was made with Georgia Tom on piano and Tampa Red on guitar. Tampa Red had a little song which he wanted set to music, but it coincided with Georgia Tom's determination to devote his energies to the church and to the writing of 'gospel songs'. Eventually Tampa talked him round to writing out the tune of *Tight Like That* and they recorded it together for Vocalion. The first royalty cheque was for \$2,400.19 – and Georgia Tom put off the day when he abandoned 'Race' music. It was the first of a highly successful series of issues which reflected and perhaps exploited the anxieties and optimism of the new migrants. The homesick were to find support:

I'm a stranger here just blowed in your town (2)
Just because I'm a stranger everybody want to dog me round.

I wonder how can some people dog a poor stranger so, (2)
They should remember they goin' to reap what they sow.

I'm goin' back south if I wear out ninety-nine pair o'shoes, (2)
Then I know I'll be welcome an' I won't have the stranger's blues.

But those who had made the adjustment to urban living had their confidence bolstered by 'hokum' recordings. A minstrel show term for good-natured guying of simple folkways, 'hokum' played on the city-dweller's ambivalent mixture of condescension and nostalgia for the more innocent pleasures of rural life. Tampa Red's Hokum Jug Band or the Hokum Boys, whose personnel varied considerably but which commenced with Tampa Red and Georgia Tom singing *Beedle-Um-Bum* and *Sellin' That Stuff* were comic, ribbing 'good-time' groups who used guitars, piano, kazoo,

string bass, clarinet even, in imitation of the country string bands, but with an urban sophistication. The Hokum Boys, the Hokum Trio, the Famous Hokum Boys, the Harum Scarums, the Hokum Jug Band were among the many groups of this kind. When Georgia Tom gave up the blues in 1932 and devoted his energies to the writing of gospel songs, Tampa Red continued to work and record, developing his 'Chicago Five' with Black Bob playing piano, Arnett Nelson or another musician often playing clarinet and, by the mid-'thirties, Willie B. James playing guitar.

Willie B. James, who came from Duck Hill, Mississippi, modelled himself on the Famous Hokum Boys' lead guitarist, Big Bill Broonzy, who also worked with Georgia Tom. Broonzy was born in June 1893 in Scott, Mississippi, but was taken by his family to Arkansas when he was a child. Though he played a home-made cigar-box fiddle and learned many songs from his older relatives, he did not play blues until he came to Chicago in 1920. There he claimed to have been taught guitar by Papa Charlie Jackson, the banjo-player. With the exception of one or two isolated sides in the preceding few years, he was thirty-seven before he recorded at all extensively in 1930 and by this time he was an accomplished guitar player, capable of playing rag and dance pieces like *Saturday Night Rub* or *Guitar Rag* as well as orthodox blues. His many recordings with Frank Brasswell playing second guitar, with Georgia Tom and others, were frequently in the hokum vein and established a strain through his work which in the later 'thirties was heard in the stomps and fast 'jive' tunes of his Chicago Five. Ribald like *Good Jelly* or *Flat Foot Susie with her Flat Yes Yes* they were 'good-time music', unpretentious and confident, with rolling boogie-woogie piano from Joshua Altheimer or Black Bob and 'gaspipes' clarinet or sax played by Buster Bennett or Bill Osborn.

But there was another side of Big Bill which was expressed in a large number of slow and medium-paced blues recordings, poignant and unaffected. In his voice could be heard a quality that recalled the field holler and an authority that suggested the city-dweller. Both were present because his life was spent between his Chicago home and his Arkansas farm, and with his continued contact with both rural and urban living, Broonzy sang of each with feeling. His guitar playing made extensive use of choked notes and 'hammering-on' the strings within the framework of a rocking, swinging beat. When he sang, he seemed to cry; he had the intonation of Leroy Carr with much of the effortless instrumental technique of Scrapper Blackwell.

Look like everybody, mama got a friend but me (2)
I'm a poor boy, baby, mama good as I can be.

Baby when I'm happy, my friends are happy too (2)
So now I have fell in bad luck, mama what am I going to do?

Babe I'm motherless and I'm fatherless, sister- and brotherless too (2)
Baby today I'm so blue baby, I don't know what to do.

Big Bill was neither motherless nor sisterless, but he sang for those who were. When Leroy Carr died, he largely took his place in creating urban folk blues that yet appealed to a larger, and up to a point, unknown audience. But he had established himself as an individual artist long before, and when recording resumed after the worst days of the Depression, Big Bill and Leroy Carr were both among the first to be reinstated as artists.

The Great Depression marks a watershed in blues. Inevitably African Americans suffered worst when the stock market crash of 1929 brought the subsequent downhill tumble of the entire national economy. A quarter of the nation's total labour force was out of work by the summer of 1932 – twelve million unemployed. Of these a substantial proportion were black. They stood in rows in the breadlines, drank in silence in the soup kitchens, put newspapers inside their jackets to keep out the bitter cold of the Chicago winter. In the south, cotton prices dropped to a few cents a pound and unemployment was widespread. But the weather was warmer and the south was home; thousands streamed slowly back. Those that remained lived in unheated rooms, or in the shanty-town 'Hooverilles' that sprang up on the outskirts of the cities. One of the very few recordings made in 1933, in the heart of the Depression told in the words of 'Joe Stone' (probably J. D. Short) the feelings of an unemployed black man.

And it's hard time here, hard time everywhere (3)

I went down to the factory where I worked years,
I went down to the factory where I worked for years ago,
And the boss man tol' me 'Man I ain't hirin' here no mo'.

And we have a little city that they call down in Hooverville (2)
Times have got so hard people, they ain't got no place to live.

In the same year, 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration

was established with \$500,000,000 to dispose in grants-in-aid to state agencies to help them with their relief programmes, a dollar being given for every three being spent from state funds. Many States resented an alleged implication that they could not manage their own affairs, while their officials showed a reluctance to help black people with relief. One singer, Carl Martin, expressed it this way:

Now I'm gettin' tired of sittin' around,
I ain't makin' a dime, just wearing my shoe-soles down,
(refrain) Now everybody's cryin' 'Let's have a New Deal'
Cause I've got to make a livin' if I have to rob and steal.

Now you go to your workhouse, put in your complaint,
Eight times out of ten, you know, they'll say 'I cain't . . .

They don't want to give you no dough, won't hardly pay
your rent,
And it ain't costin' them one dog-gone cent . . .

Now I ain't made a dime since they closed down the mill,
I'm sittin' right here waitin' on that brand New Deal.

Carl Martin, who was born in 1906, moved from Knoxville, Tennessee to Chicago in 1932; his blues was one of many which directly reflected the bitterness of the Depression and its aftermath. To President Roosevelt the greatest danger in the relief programme lay in the damage to self-respect for the unemployed in having to join the breadlines and receive handouts without being engaged in work. There were many agencies, the Red Cross among them, which undertook the work of giving aid to the hungry, but many Blacks who recalled the armed and segregated Red Cross camps during the Mississippi floods of 1927 regarded them with suspicion. Blues singer Walter Roland, equally accomplished on piano or guitar and in this case playing the latter instrument, spoke for those who found themselves obliged to accept charity handouts and 'Red Cross rice'.

Says you know I'm gonna sing this here verse now an'
I soon ain't gonna sing no more
Cause my wife an' children is hungry
An' speck' I'm goin' have to go
And holler 'Oh . . .' Great Lord I'm goin' have to go,
Says you know I just must go home and get my crocus-sack
Go down to that Red Cross Store.

But you know one thing is certain that
All these people see,
Red Cross don't give you everything you want,
But they'll give you somethin' you need,
I told 'em 'No . . .'
Great Lord, says I can't go,
Says you know I cannot go to hill
I've gotta go to Red Cross Store.

In the post-Depression years, African Americans seemed to need to be given the assurance that their economic and social stresses were shared and understood, and if no one else could give it without appearing condescending, the blues singer could. The blues in this period was sometimes less rich musically than it had been hitherto, but the content of the verses, which mattered greatly to those who bought the discs, was of more immediate social relevance than at any previous time. There was also more experiment in the blues form, with verse and refrain and extended recitative blues becoming popular. There were blues on unemployment, on the Public Works Administration and the Works Projects Administration which provided employment schemes under Federal control; there were blues about high rents and low wages; blues on shootings and razor cuttings, on chain gangs and penitentiaries; there were blues about gambling and prostitution; blues about broken homes, infidelity, leaving men and forsaken women. There were blues about migration – of hoboes on the railroads and tramps on the highways. Blues about superstition and folk beliefs, blues which persisted in the cities; blues about hair straightening, about colour stratification, about beauty aids and physical features – the singers' lack of sophistication often expressed itself in those subjects which would have been anathema to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. There were blues, too, about sickness – tuberculosis, pneumonia, pellagra; blues about the death of wives and parents, stated sometimes with a chilling acceptance and inevitability. Disasters were often reported in similar words of fatalism – floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, conflagrations:

If your house catch on fire and there ain't no water round, (2)
Throw your gal out the window and let the shack burn down.

became commonplace.

It would seem that many blues were basically accommodative, helping both the singer and the listener to adjust to a situation over

which he had no control. Poll taxes made universal suffrage a joke – *Taxes on my Pole* became an ironic sexual pun in the blues. Always the themes, however large in conception or universal in experience, were personalised: the singer composed his blues for the individual. Heroes were rare – President Roosevelt or Joe Louis perhaps; other blues singers. The death of Leroy Carr or Bessie Smith meant far more in the blues than the activities of politicians. Blues singers spoke for the black masses, not for N.A.A.C.P. leaders or lawyers or writers or African American intellectuals. The blues singer did not campaign for Civil Rights, he did not give statistics. Instead he spoke as one of the numerals in the statisticians' tables.

As a folk song of protest, the blues was seldom outspoken, at least on record. Sometimes a verse was addressed to 'Mister Charlie', sometimes there was a guarded line about 'the white man' but more direct targets were avoided or discouraged by the record companies. Black self-assertiveness found expression instead in sexual themes. Above all other subjects there is in blues a preponderance of lyrics about sexual love, or merely sex. A complex language of metaphors, often domestic or culinary, camouflaged a multitude of sexual references. 'I want my biscuits in the daytime and my jelly at night,' declares one singer. 'My stove's in good condition, this is the stove to brown your bread,' his woman replies. A swaggering list of the singer's physical attributes was common, with women no less than with men. 'I'm a big fat woman with meat shakin' on the bone, and every time I shake it a skinny woman leaves her home.' Sexual virtuosity is the subject of scores of blues and the singer played a game with the censor and hence with 'the Man' when he sang *The Dirty Dozen* or *Shave 'Em Dry*. His words were heavily bowdlerised but were clear enough to his listeners. Sometimes a more specific code would be used – the number combinations of the 'policy racket' – a kind of 'housey-housey' – in which the figures 3-6-9 would mean excreta or 4-11-44 would mean a phallus. In his sexual prowess, real or imagined, a man could realise himself; he knew and asserted the maturity which segregation and race legislation deprived him of within the total society. In sexual blues the spirit of revolt was canalised; the blues singer did not care whether he or she was fitting popular stereotypes: 'I'm blue, black, and I'm evil; and I did not make myself,' Alice Moore declared.