Mississippi Delta Blues

"BLOW MY BLUES AWAY" Vol. 2

Recorded by GEORGE MITCHELL in the 1960s

MISSISSIPPI DELTA BLUES
in the 1960s – Vol. 2
An Introduction – by George Mitchell (1968)

It was our fifth day in Mississippi. My wife and I were whiling away the time on a bench in the "downtown" section of Como. The town, population 789, was strangely quiet to urban ears. Interstate 55 streamed past on one side, while old Highway 51 rambled along the other. Half the storefronts along the lifeless business district were boarded up. The only public bathroom was in the one-room city hall across the street. A hand scrawled sign in the window of Mrs. M. Perkins' store read: "Pay your burial dues here."

So far, we had had no luck in locating unrecorded blues singers—the purpose of our trip. We had been up half the night before trying to get the Como Drum Band down on tape. It was the first time our recorder had even been on and we had had to suffer five hours of headaches to fill half a reel of tape. Most of the evening was spent on Fred McDowell's unlit front porch waiting for the members of the band, watching the headlights as they crept by on the highway, hoping they might turn into the field in front of the house and head toward us. It was past midnight when the outdoor recording session finally got underway. And three hours more before the drums were lying on the ground among the lard buckets in which Annie Mae McDowell had planted sunflowers. Then Othar Turner, one of the drummers, walked over and propped his leg on the porch where I was sitting. "If you want a man who can flat lay down the blues," he said nonchalantly, "I know who that be." Othar gave us directions to his house and said to be there at 3 o'clock and he'd take us to "where R. L. Burnside stayed at if nothing didn't happen."

A little bit before 3, we gathered ourselves together and headed for Othar's. As we bumped along a nar-

Joe Callicott

row dirt road that ran through the middle of a seemingly endless cotton field, we wondered whether Burnside was going to be another mediocre musician who could play a couple of John Lee Hooker tunes. We waited at Othar's shack while he unhitched his mule, hung up his torn straw hat (really), changed his boots, and we were off to R. L. Burnside's.

It was 30 steaming minutes before we stopped at the barbed wire gate in front of Burnside's house after a drive through the backwoods near Coldwater that I thought our little bug would never survive. Burnside's house sat in back of his "bossman's" barns and sheds which appeared considerably more livable than Burnside's crackerbox shanty. My wife got out of the car, unfastened the gate and then quickly shut it so as not to let a shaggy old horse escape (although he appeared much too worn out to ever make the effort). About six or seven raggedy kids darting here and there on the hard packed dirt yard under several clothesless clotheslines stopped dead when they saw us and ran into the house. A woman peered through the gaping hole in the screen door, and we asked her if R. L. was in, adding that we wanted to hear him play. She stepped out on the sagging front porch, shooed away the swarm of flies, pointed in the direction of a cornfield to our right and replied in a friendly drawl, "No, he's over yonder cuttin' corn. You go back out and down the road and then cut over but you better walk cause that old bridge liable not to hold no car."

I had expected to see Burnside "cutting corn" by hand but he was driving a tractor which was slashing down the parched stalks like a lawn mower. Two laughing little boys, their shirts hanging open on their dark brown chests, were running alongside. Burnside was at the opposite end of one of the rows and waved when he saw us. We stood there watching as he guided the tractor in our direction, shutting it off when he reached us and stepping down smiling. Not asking what we wanted, he wiped his brow and exclaimed,

"Whew, it's hot. How y'all doing?" After chatting for a few minutes I said we had been told he could play some old-time blues and we would love to hear him. Burnside laughed and said sure, to come back that night after he'd finished work.

It was dark when we were again winding along the roads back to his house, the night hushed except for the chirping of the katydids. Finally, we saw a dim light burning off to the right and we judged it could be R. L.'s. We were late and about 10 or 12 grins and stares met us when we entered his house. Nine of Burnside's ten kids were sprawled out in the side room on one of the two clumpy beds that accommodated the whole family. But they jumped up and scrambled into the hot and stuffy front room when they heard us. They plopped down on the warped, dirty floor because the only other pieces of furniture, a sofa with the springs splitting through the tattered covering and a wooden box covered by a piece of colored plastic, were occupied by R.L., his wife, Othar, and friends who had come over for the affair. But spaces were quickly made for us and beer was offered.

We were anxious to hear some blues but had to wait while R. L. scraped down our wound little-E string—he said the string has to be slick for "choking." Any fears I had harbored earlier about Burnside's musical ability were immediately shed when he sat down and began putting out a droning but rhythmic sound on the guitar and chanting: "Goin' down South, goin' down South, goin' down South." Practically hypnotized, I forgot about the couch spring poking my back and the sweat pouring down my face and watched Othar and one of R. L.'s kids snap their fingers and stomp the floor in an improvised dance to the continuous, rolling rhythm. When the song was over, I whipped out my tape recorder. And the music that played late into that night is what you hear on this CD.

It was several days later, on a Saturday, when we rolled into the courthouse square in Hernando, just north

of Coldwater. The small towns which dot the Delta and its fringes seem almost deserted on weekdays. But "going into town" on Saturday is the major recreation for the men, and the streets and cafes are filled. Some play checkers on the courthouse lawn, some sit on benches outside the barbershop, and others get drunk in the shoddy cafes which line the streets of the "colored section." On that Saturday in Hernando, we pulled up in front of a cluster of Black men shooting the bull in front of the courthouse and spitting tobacco juice on the sidewalk. Directing the question toward no one in particular, I asked if anyone had ever heard of Joe Callicott. A moment passed and no one said anything. "Callicott? Joe Callicott?" an elderly man finally piped up. "Ain't never heard of him. Go ask Eli. He'll tell you. He knows just about everybody in these parts." He pointed to an old, stooped-over man wearing a dirty black derby who was leaning against a pair of stand-up penny scales in front of a hardware store. Eli had known Callicott for years. He said Joe lived in Nesbit about seven miles north and we could find him just east of the big highway. Callicott's house could not be seen from the road but there was a mailbox, with "Callicott" scribbled on it, beside a deeply rutted driveway on a steep hill. We parked our car and climbed through the mud to a little house enshrouded in kudzu vine and giant sunflowers. We knocked, and asked the man who answered if Joe Callicott lived there. The man grinned a wide smile and invited us in. "How y'all doing? Have a seat. I'm Joe." It wasn't long before he was putting out the old songs that most people have heard only on records, the songs you hear on this CD.

Burnside and Callicott were our first "real finds" of the trip, but there were many more to come during the five often frustrating but eventful weeks we spent combing the Delta for blues singers in the summer of 1967. And we discovered that the oft-heard contention that every worthwhile blues singer in the '20's and '30's was recorded has

no basis in fact. Probably many good bluesmen of the time never found their way on wax simply because the Ralph Peers and the H. C. Spears never ran across their paths or because they were unaware of the market. Several very good singers I recorded who would have been at their best during this period had heard few or no blues records. The belief that all good Delta bluesmen were recorded is usually based on interviews with "re-discovered" musicians who cannot recall having heard any talented unrecorded singers. But most of the bluesmen I recorded in Mississippi had rarely even heard any of these men's records—Blind Lemon Jefferson's being the ones most frequently mentioned—much less met them.

Also contrary to popular belief, country blues has not yet died in Mississippi, though it probably will within the next 20 years. Most of the older musicians no longer play, but there seems to be a substantial number of bluesmen, usually in their 50's, who are still active on a very part-time basis. Most of the ones we found did not own guitars and were a little rusty, although they were able to play a few numbers well. Burnside and Callicott were probably the two most consistently good and in command of the widest repertoires.

Burnside, an intelligent man with a quick smile, supports a wife, 10 children and a grandchild from his earnings as a farm laborer on a farm outside Coldwater, Miss., in the hill country. Born near Coldwater 42 years ago, he started helping his father farm at the age of 12. When he was grown, he left Mississippi for Chicago, where he worked in a chemical plant for four or five years. He returned to Mississippi when his mother became ill, married a girl there, and decided to stay on and farm. His experiences in both the North and South, coupled with his own natural intelligence, have given him an unusual perception of the social problems in Mississippi, and he will readily discuss them. Burnside did not begin playing guitar until he was 29 and says he taught himself by listening to oth-

ers. He was one of the very few bluesmen we recorded with a guitar of his own, and he was very popular in the Como-Coldwater-Senatobia area.

Callicott, 67, lives with his wife and sister in his birthplace of Nesbit, Mississippi, about 14 miles from Coldwater. He learned how to play guitar when he was 15. "I'd stand around and look, you know," he recalls. "Just look at 'em and listen and go ahead on like I'm not paying 'em no attention. I'd catch it. I'd come home to my box and play it." Callicott was discovered by Jim Jackson, who was playing at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. He later cut his only record, ("Traveling Mama Blues" and "Fare Thee Well Blues," included here as #10 & 11) in February of 1930. Two of his best friends were Garfield Akers and Frank Stokes, the influence of the latter coming through very strong in Callicott's own style. Callicott stopped playing eight or nine years ago when Akers died but took it back up a little less than two years ago. He is pleased and proud that someone is once again taking interest in him and his music, and he seems to get as big a kick out of performing as his audience does out of listening. Before the last note of a song fades away, Joe often chuckles and proclaims, "That sound pretty good, don't it?" Last time we were there, in April of 1968, he had a student to brag about, a 10-year-old white boy from down the road who brought his guitar to Joe's almost every day to learn from one of the best of the living masters of a dying musical form.

Notes adapted from ***Blow My Blues Away*** *by George Mitchell (Originally published by Louisiana State University Press – Baton Rouge, La. (1971); and now available from DeCapo Press – New York (1984)) in which many of the performers heard on these two CDs relate their stories and feelings in greater detail.*

The Music

(Comments by David Evans – 1968)

Joe Callicott and R. L. Burnside, who have both lived almost their entire lives only a few miles apart on

Highway 51, represent two nearly opposite ends of the varied spectrum of Mississippi blues. This is not merely the generation gap reflected in music. Rather, these two men have developed quite different approaches to blues.

Callicott, the older man, shows a close musical affinity to his old friend Frank Stokes. Both have a kind of quavering vocal delivery, which combined with clear diction and a good feeling for lyrics can be very effective in putting across the meaning of a song. Callicott, like Stokes, plays a metronomic duple strum on the guitar with rather little finger picking on the treble strings. Stokes, however, had a second guitar or violin on most of his records to fill in the spaces when he wasn't singing with an interesting instrumental line. Most of Calicott's and Stokes' songs fall into the standard twelve-bar AAB blues pattern with the usual three chords and standard chord changes in the accompaniment. In the case of Callicott this is a bit surprising considering his long association with Garfield Akers, a musician who seems to have been fond of nonstandard blues. Only on "Love Me Baby Blues" does he play the sort of song that Akers might have performed. But while he generally limits himself to standard musical structures, Calicott can at the same time draw from a wide variety of musical ideas and melodies known in many parts of the South which happen to fit these structures. On this record he plays in three different keys of standard guitar tuning and in one open tuning, while he sings melodies which are known by bluesmen as far away as Texas and Georgia. Akers, on the other hand, played all his recorded songs in the same key.

Burnside represents a number of different tendencies. The most striking fact about his songs is that none of them falls into any standard blues pattern. He makes very few chord changes in his accompaniments, preferring to set up a drone throughout his songs. Both his melodies, which often remind one of field hollers, and his guitar parts tend to be pentatonic. His guitar play-

ing is much more percussive than Callicott's, and he picks rather than strums, playing only one note or chord at a time. (In contrast, Callicott will sometimes overlay his strumming with simultaneous finger picking.) On "Skinny Woman" Burnside adds to the percussiveness of the guitar by tapping on its body with his fingers. Another interesting feature of Burnside's songs is his compression of the vocal line. Even when he takes his material from commercially recorded blues, which he frequently does, he usually chooses songs which have this same characteristic. Generally these songs are well known in Northern Mississippi, and Burnside may have already been familiar with versions of them before he heard them on records.

Houston Stackhouse

1993 update:

R.L. Burnside has become an active blues performer since these, his first recordings were made. He can be seen in the film ***Deep Blues*** and may be contacted at PO Box 5021, Holly Springs, MS 38635.

Joe Callicott died in 1970 or 1971. Since the end of 1971 Tradition Music Co., the publisher of his songs, paid royalties to his widow, Mrs. Dore Callicott, especially for "Love Me Baby Blues" which Ry Cooder had by then recorded as "France Chance." The last correspondence we had from her was in 1983. All letters since 1989 have been returned as "unknown."

Houston Stackhouse, Robert Nighthawk, and **James "Peck" Curtis** of the Blues Rhythm Boys have all died since these recordings were made. Readers of these notes are urged to contact Arhoolie Records in case they know of the whereabouts of any of the performers on these two CDs of Mississippi Delta Blues.

(Chris Strachwitz—1993)

Right: R. L Burnside

MISSISSIPPI DELTA BLUES in the 1960s —Vol. 2

ARHOOLIE CD 402

JOE CALLICOTT *(vocal & guitar)*

1. **Lonesome Katy Blues** (3:04)
2. **Come Home to Me Baby** (3:49)
3. **Fare You Well Baby Blues** (3:18)
4. **Country Blues** (3:21)
5. **Laughing to Keep From Crying** (3:40)
6. **Love Me Baby Blues** (3:16) **(France Chance)**
7. **I Rolled and I Tumbled** (2:50) (*)
8. **Old Bo Weevil** (3:09) (*)
9. **Up Town Blues** (4:01) (*)
10. **Traveling Mama Blues** (3:16) (**)
11. **Fare Thee Well Blues** (3:18) (**)

R. L. BURNSIDE *(vocal & guitar)*

12. **Poor Black Mattie** (2:04)
13. **Long Haired Doney** (3:33)
14. **Going Down South** (2:33)
15. **Skinny Woman** (2:43)
16. **I's Be Troubled** (2:54)
17. **Catfish Blues** (3:16)
18. **See My Jumper Hangin' Out on the Line** (2:35) (*)
19. **I Rolled and I Tumbled** (3:11)(*)
20. **Walking Blues** (2:29) (*)
21. **Nightmare Blues** (3:18) (*)

HOUSTON STACKHOUSE *(vocal & guitar)* **and The Blues Rhythm Boys: (Robert Nighthawk – bass; James "Peck" Curtis – drums** ***(& vocal on #24).***

22. **Cool Water Blues** (2:54) (*)
23. **Big Road Blues** (2:51) (*)
24. **Right Around the Corner** (3.14) (*)
25. **Canned Heat** (3:30)

Total Time: 77:26

(*) = previously unreleased on Arhoolie.

(**) = recorded in 1930 and originally issued on Br. 7166 (78rpm).

All others first appeared on Arhoolie 1041 or 1042. All selections written or arranged by the performing artists and © by Tradition Music Co. (BMI).

Note: #13: "Doney" is a common expression in the South among both blacks and whites for "girl friend."

Recorded by George Mitchell in 1967 & 1968.
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All photographs by George Mitchell