



VIRGINIA TRADITIONS

BRI 006



Tidewater Blues

Cultivating tobacco in Caroline County, Virginia

Tidewater Blues

The blues began as one form of noncommercial folk music performed by blacks in the deep South during the 1890's. It evolved out of the field hollers, minstrel show songs, fiddle and banjo dance tunes, ballads and ragtime that constituted Afro-American secular music prior to 1900. While the precise genesis of blues remains unclear, it is possible to place the evolution of blues within its social, cultural and historical context.

The final decades of the 1800's were characterized by widespread and earnest political, social and economic actions taken against black Americans. This movement was so pervasive and intense that it was tantamount to a return to slavery. The cultural reaction to these suppressive actions was seen in such diverse fields as politics, poetry and education. The resulting ferment occurred in part because the first generation of truly free Afro-Americans was reaching maturity just as this new wave of oppressive racist laws was being enacted. The development of blues was just one direct response to this complex situation.

Blues songs were being sung in various sections of the South by the early 1900's, having been transmitted by medicine shows, travelling musicians and, by 1912, sheet music. Extensive fieldwork by Howard Odum in Mississippi and Georgia between 1905 and 1908 yielded a number of interesting blues texts but, unfortunately, little musical analysis.¹ Several of these early examples consist of lines and stanzas that later turn up on commercially recorded blues records during the 1920's and 1930's. These include versions and fragments of "Poor Boy Long Ways From Home," "Cocaine Habit," and "Nobody's Dirty Business."² Odum collected other ballads, such as "Casey Jones," and minstrel songs like "You Shall Be Free," which remain in oral circulation among Afro-Americans. It is difficult to determine exactly how rapidly the blues tradition spread throughout the South, but it appears certain that by World War I blues was being played in every southern state.

It is probable these early blues were more flexible and less thematic than the performances heard on phonograph records beginning with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" (Okeh 4169), recorded in August, 1920. This assumption is partially borne out by the early examples found by Odum and the texts collected by Newman Ivey White in North Carolina.³ By the 1920's the blues was functioning as both a folk and popular music transmitted through oral circulation, but also by

way of the vaudeville stage, copyrighted sheet music and phonograph records. These last three modes helped circulate blues into the mainstream of American popular music. It was through popularization more than anything that blues became standardized into the twelve-bar AAB verse form so common today.

This album consists of 16 performances recorded throughout Tidewater Virginia between 1928 and 1979. These performances range from the unaccompanied vocal quartet sides by the Monarch Jazz Quartet to the virtuoso guitar-accompanied blues by William Moore. "Tidewater Blues" covers a wide stylistic range but focuses upon the traditional blues which are most frequently performed with the accompaniment of the guitar. It stands as a testimony to the strength and vigor of the blues tradition as well as the creativity and musical inventiveness found in this section of the state.

Tidewater Virginia

The term "tidewater" refers to the area in

which the ocean's tides affect the inland waterways, and in Virginia this section consists of the flat lowland which stretches from the coast approximately 100 miles to the west. Its western border is defined by Fredericksburg (Stafford County) to the north and Emporia (Greensville County) to the south. Tidewater Virginia was settled as early as any part of the United States. Jamestown lies within the confines of Tidewater, and Hampton bills itself as the "longest continually English-speaking city in the country." This area was first inhabited by the Native Americans who, along with the English settlers and their African slaves, enriched Tidewater with a varied cultural heritage.

The land near the coast is dominated by water-related industries such as boat and ship building, fishing, oystering and beach resorts. The armed services have for many years been firmly entrenched in Tidewater and today the Navy alone supplies the area with thousands of jobs. Further inland there are many small family-operated farms, but in the counties to the south of the



Picking peanuts from stacks of dried vines.

¹Howard W. Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," *Journal of American Folklore* XXIV (1911), 255-94, 351-96.

²These examples include Barbecue Bob "Poor Boy A Long Ways From Home" (Columbia 14246) & Banjo Joe (Gus Gannon) "Poor Boy, Long Ways From Home" (Paramount 12571); Memphis Jug Band, "Cocaine Habit Blues" (Victor V38620); John Hurt "Nobody's Dirty Business" (Okeh 8560) & Frank Stokes "Tain't Nobody's Dirty Business If I Do"

³Newman Ivey White, *American Negro Folk-Song* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1928).



Photo Courtesy Tom West, Birdsong Peanut Co., Suffolk, Virginia

Stacking peanut vines on "pea poles."

James River are vast peanut farms covering dozens of square miles. Sussex County is in the heart of peanut-producing country, and one of its small towns, Wakefield, calls itself "The Peanut Capital of the World." Southern Tidewater is also quite swampy, and many lumber companies of varying sizes operate in Suffolk and Southampton Counties.

Other contrasts are evident in Tidewater. The regal expansive "plantations" along the James River in Charles City County, for example, stand in striking contrast to the urban decay found along Church Street in Norfolk. Looming above the many boarded-up buildings along Church Street stands the Hotel Omni and Scope, as modern a convention, sports and shopping complex as any in the United States. On the peninsula, the gigantic Newport News Dry Dock and Ship Building Company affirms that the area is rapidly

approaching the 21st century. In the center of Tidewater (New Kent and King William Counties) lie the remnants of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Indian culture. These tribes once formed a vital culture that thrived long before the European settlers arrived in the mid 1600's.

Amid the diversity and contradictions, numerous older folkways persist. These folkways are more often found in rural sections, but they can also be found in cities and towns. It is still possible, for example, to find people slaughtering hogs and curing the hams late each autumn, fashioning axe and hoe handles from white oak, or weaving "dip-nets" for crabbing. These people follow practices and skills handed down through many generations and often pass them on to younger members of their community. Many younger people in Tidewater still practice traditions such as quilting, boat building, net mending

and baking "clabber" (sour milk) biscuits.

Many crafts, such as quilting and basket making, were undertaken both by blacks and whites in Tidewater. There are, however, several specific oral traditions which are distinctly Afro-American. These traditions are still widely practiced, and several have evolved to a level of verbal art.

"Toasts," long narratives most often told by males while consuming alcohol, provide the most dramatic example of a highly refined verbal art. The toasts are ribald tall tales relating the triumphs of black males over everyone and everything. Many toasts are found in oral circulation and on "party" records, but two of the most common are "Shine and the Titanic" and "The Monkey and the Lion." Although they have existed for many decades, it is only in the last twenty years that toasts have received serious study.⁴

⁴For more information on toasts see, Bruce Jackson, "Get Your Ass In The Water and Swim Like Me", Rounder 2014, David Evans, "The Toast in Context," *Journal of American Folklore*, p. 128-148, and Bruce Jackson, "Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me": *Narrative Poetry From Black Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974).

Another oral tradition is an insult ritual known as "the dozens." Both males and females often engage in playing the dozens with insults against the integrity and sexual fidelity of their rival's mother. The dozens are usually played in jest but occasionally take on more serious overtones which can result in serious confrontations. The social context for this ritual is very informal and often occurs on street corners or in bars.⁵ Versions of the dozens have also appeared on phonograph records over the years and the first musical adaptation was recorded by Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman) for Brunswick in September, 1929.

Several types of folk music are also unique to Afro-American oral tradition. The best-known example is religious music. Not all black religious music, of course, is traditional but the majority has its roots in folk culture. The most traditional religious music is found in the more conservative Holiness, Pentecostal and Baptist churches.

Worksongs are another distinctly black style of folk music, one that has virtually disappeared in Tidewater. Worksongs were sung to set the tempo and rhythm for work such as chopping logs, hoeing cotton, shucking oysters or caulking boats. The black Menhaden fishermen, for example, used worksongs as they hauled in their nets, but this tradition was obliterated in the early 1950's when hydraulic winches were installed on fishing boats. For an entire album of worksongs from Tidewater, listen to BRI 007. Another genre of Afro-American folk music, blues, has also been important in Tidewater for many decades.

The blues has been sung by area blacks since World War I. According to Gavin Jones, born in Newport News in 1902, the first blues song he heard was in Newport news in 1918. Jones, a protege of Corner Morris, learned his first blues songs from a man known only as "Shorty." Mr. Jones learned two songs from Shorty, "Red River Blues" and "Going Down The Road Feeling Bad," in approximately 1920. Jones in turn taught these two popular songs to Corner Morris, and his version of the latter song is heard on Side 1, Band 8. Morris grew up in rural Suffolk County, and he too first heard blues, performed by his cousin James Moore, just after World War I.

The Blues As A Musical Form

The blues most people are familiar with come from two basic sources: oral tradition and commercial phonograph records. While the sales of these records have greatly diminished over the past 25 years, blues records were sold in large quantities from 1920 until approximately 1955 to a predominately black audience. These commercial-

ly recorded blues records frequently drew from oral tradition, but many featured professional performers singing material especially shaped or composed for them. These recordings have several traits which tend to set them apart from traditional blues: first, they are usually exactly 12 bars in length and adhere to the standard AAB verse format; second, the song texts are often thematic or maintain a semblance of a story line.

These traits are important because they helped reinforce upon the public (including the folk musicians who purchased blues records) a more rigid notion of the aesthetics of blues. As blues moved from a primarily oral tradition to one that was transmitted through mass media, the almost inevitable process of uniformity and standardization set in. The public generally came to expect the blues to be constructed and performed in a certain manner and this, of course, influenced the traditional musicians performing within the black community. These differences did not cause an aesthetic conflict within the Afro-American community, rather they made people more receptive to and appreciative of these two divergent symbiotic approaches.⁶

These aesthetic considerations raise an important point about traditional music in general. The point is that folk music is always interacting with popular music in a cross-fertilization which has gone on for decades and influenced both in many diverse ways.⁷ Popular music frequently draws upon folk material for inspiration, just as folk musicians take inspiration from popular music. Perhaps the best local example of this is provided by Carl Hodges of Saluda, Virginia, who performs a varied repertoire of gospel songs, blues and blues ballads. Along with this traditional music, much of which is rooted in the commercial blues recordings of the 1930's and 1940's, Carl also plays a song popular in the early 1970's, "Jeremiah Was A Bullfrog." This song gained national popularity when it was recorded by the Australian rock group, Three Dog Night. Mr. Hodges learned it from the radio and performs the song because children enjoy it.

The performance of composed songs, specifically blues, by traditional musicians is not new. Folk musicians encountered them on sheet music as early as 1912, and by the late teens such standard pieces as "Hesitation Blues" and "St. Louis Blues," both of which were copywritten by W.C. Handy, appeared in oral circulation. In the early and mid 1920's, Perry Bradford and Spencer Williams were composing songs for several of the popular female blues singers: Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters and Clara Smith. This practice occurred again in the late 1930's and early 1940's when Big

Bill (Broonzy) and Robert Brown (also known as Washboard Sam) penned many songs for the blues singers recording for the Bluebird label. Most of the musicians on this record have been influenced to some degree by the composed blues heard on commercial recordings. "Tidewater Blues," however, concentrates on examples of the more traditional blues.

Folk blues are usually more idiosyncratic and personal than the composed and formal performances often heard on commercial discs. They often do not adhere to the twelve-bar tonic (I), subdominant (IV), dominant (V) structure that is the cornerstone of the blues harmonic progression. Carl Hodges' "Poor Boy Blues" (Side 2, Band 6) is a fine example of the looser harmonic structure of traditional blues. "Poor Boy Blues" is shorter than the conventional format and runs between 10 and 11 bars. Hodges' harmonic sense also varies from the norm as the two basic chords he uses are the tonic (I) and subdominant (IV).

The personal structure of folk blues is nowhere more evident on this recording than the performance by Big Boy (Side 2, Band 2). Only one of the verses is a twelve-bar blues and it serves to illustrate how a "classic" blues is structured. Note that Big Boy follows the AAB verse structure which fits precisely into the I, IV, V harmonic pattern:

Ever been down, you know 'bout how I feel. (Instrumental)
 (I) (I) (I) (I)
Ever been down, know 'bout how I feel. (Instrumental)
 (IV) (IV) (I) (I)
Like a soldier lying here on some battlefield. (Instrumental)
 (V) (IV) (I) (I)

"Blues" is a representational example of a traditional blues because it contains many interesting (though typical) musical and textual variations. It has a well-defined theme of wanderlust which is developed in a nonlinear lyrical manner. All of its stanzas are rooted in oral tradition and reshaped into a unique song. These borrowed textual phrases and stanzas constitute the basic building blocks for an "original" blues. They are original in the sense that the musician has constructed verses in an unusual or new combination and because the musical ideas are at least partially improvised. These oral formulas are ones heard from other sources and expressed in slightly different ways. For example, the third line of "Blues" contains the sentence "Won't you run here baby, scream this lonesome song?" This sentence can be divided into two formulaic phrases: "Won't you run here baby," and "scream this lonesome song." The first is related to other formulas from oral tradition such as "Come here baby," "Please come here mama," or "Come over here gal," while the second falls

⁵For more on this social context, see Roger Abrahams, *Deep Down In The Jungle* (Chicago:Aldine, 1970).

⁶For a fuller examination of this subject, see David Evans, "Folk, Commercial, and Folklorist Aesthetics in the Blues," *Jazzforschung*, 5 (1973), 11-32.

⁷For an overview of these dynamics, see George Foster, "What Is Folk Culture?," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 55 (1953), 159-173.

into the same group as "sing my lonesome song," "moan my hardluck song" or "hear this lowdown song." The blues singer is free to place these or similar phrases together in a variety of ways to express a coherent personal expression. Thus a sentence such as "Won't you run here baby, scream this lonesome song" could readily be transformed into "new" lines such as "Please come here mama, hear this lowdown song" or "Come here baby, moan my hardluck song." This recombination technique is the single most important manner in which traditional blues are composed.⁸

The improvisational nature of folk blues is a trait it shares with other Afro-American oral traditions such as toasts or, more significantly, sermons. Both are modes of expression whose texts are frequently based on formulaic composition. The blues and Afro-American preaching also share similar emotional delivery as well as advice concerning personal problems, money, women and work.

Another role shared by blues singers and many Afro-American preachers is that of providing an emotional release for their audience. The emotional outlet which blues and Afro-American music in general brings for both the performer and his audience has been well documented by scholars.⁹ The emotive quality of blues is heightened by the singer's use of the first-person point of view which is quite subjective and individualistic. The blues is also lyrical rather than following the narrative structure often found in Anglo-American traditional song. The performance style of blues singers adds to their emotional impact. Many blues singers, like preachers, perform in an animated fashion, often using asides such as "Ain't that right?" or "Let me tell it!" The performers in turn often receive encouragement from members of their audience who "testify" to the performers effectiveness. Thus the performer and audience effectively engage in a "call and response" dialogue, making blues both a communal and ritualistic event.¹⁰

The empathy between blues singer and audience is enhanced by the familiar themes heard in many performances. Blues songs often deal with themes which members of their community can understand and appreciate. They frequently describe the relationships between men and women, always a topic of concern and uncertainty. This topic is well represented on "Tidewater Blues" in performances by Carl Hodges, Alec Seward, William Moore and John Cephas. There are, however, many blues songs about other im-

portant topics: gambling, incarceration, drugs, work and alcohol. Blues songs occasionally focus upon topical subjects such as floods, wars, and economic turmoil, but for the most part they are concerned with the patterns and events of daily life.¹¹

One cliché about blues is that they are always "sad" or "unhappy." This is, of course, partly accurate but they also express many other emotions such as elation, happiness, lust or anger. The emotional tenor of blues songs is often mixed within a single performance, as in John Cephas' "Black Rat Swing" (Side 1, Band 7). He initially expresses sadness over his lover's unfaithfulness:

Lord, you done told me that you loved me, told me a lie.

Then he realizes that he must leave her:

*Well now, here you come, wearin' your flaggins'.
I've left you woman, I ain't coming back.*

He finally describes his attitude towards her after he successfully finds a new romance:

*Well now, here you come, wearing your blue.
I've got another woman and I don't want you.*

The view that blues songs are not always sad is expressed by another Tidewater blues singer, Carl Hodges:

It's all how you feel about it. It's no sadder than the way you want to feel. If you want to sit down and feel sad, then you sit down and you do it. You might be listening to something and somebody gets all upset. You listen to it and you wonder what they getting upset about; you just don't hear it. Blues is just some thing . . . you know, you have a good time. Church music is just a feeling, blues is more of a sport, a fun song.

It is through their use of familiar themes and the evocation of commonly felt emotions that blues singers serve as spokesmen for the black community. This vital function helps explain why the blues tradition has persisted for so long within the Afro-American community. This role has been greatly reduced over the last 25 years because of the increased willingness of (and opportunities for) blacks to speak out on social, political and economic issues. These opportunities were, of course, less available during the 1920's, 1930's and



Cultivating peanuts

Photo Courtesy Tom West, Birdsong Peanut Co., Suffolk, Virginia

⁸This technique is fully discussed by Jeff Titon, *Early Downhome Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), Ch. 5.

⁹Bruce Bastin, "The Emergence of a Blues Tradition in the Southeastern States" (M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1973), 40-50; Lawrence Lefine, "The Concept of the New World Negro and the Realities of Black Culture," ed. Huggins, Kilson and Fox, *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971).

¹⁰For more information see Jeff Titon *Early Downhome Blues*, 17-22.

¹¹Topical blues songs are thoroughly examined in Paul Oliver's *The Meaning of the Blues* (New York: Collier Books, 1963).

1940's when blues was a more popular musical style. The blues singer recording for the segregated "race" labels during this period tackled such delicate subjects as the government's social service programs (Sonny Boy Williamson's "Welfare Store Blues," Bluebird B8610 & Big Bill's "W.P.A. Blues," ARC 6-08-61) and exploitation by white merchants (Barbecue Bob's "Dollar Down Blues," Columbia 14412 & Victoria Spivey's "Furniture Man Blues," Okeh 8652).

The most common themes for blues songs, however, are the interpersonal relationships between men and women. The majority of blues songs deal with this topic in one form or another. Most songs on "Tidewater Blues" revolve around this theme; even such a topical song as "War Blues" by Pernelle Charity (Side 2, Band 1) incorporates it. Indeed, it is difficult to cite very many blues songs not at least tangentially involved with the relationship between the sexes.

In the same way that male/female relations form the principal theme in blues, the most important context for this music has been performances within the Afro-American community. Much has been made of the importance of phonograph records in transmitting blues styles and as an outlet for expressing emotions, but the "house party" and other similar informal social gatherings provided the social environment for blues. Such events form the natural context for blues as house parties function as a nexus where men and women come together to drink, dance and talk.¹²

The Cultural Roots of the Blues

Tidewater Virginia, like many other places in the South where blues are played, remains essentially rural. Back during the 1920's and 1930's, the area was almost wholly rural with an economy based upon water-related or agricultural jobs. The character of Tidewater changed during the 1950's when many of the roads were paved and people began commuting longer distances to work in Richmond or the Shipyard in Newport News. Because people travelled less before these changes, they relied more upon themselves and neighbors for entertainment. Carl Hodges gives an account of the period before they had many paved roads in Middlesex County:

There wasn't much chance to get nowhere lest you hitch up the wagon and drive somewhere. Couldn't go far that way. They didn't have dances like they have today, beer joints, nothing like that. So, mostly the places you did play was for house parties. That was the biggest sport then anyway.

House parties consisted of a group of adults who gathered at a neighbor's home, usually on a Friday or Saturday night, to listen to music and



Staking tobacco in preparation for curing.

escape the drudgery of their weekly world of job and responsibilities. Alcohol was usually available, and the host frequently sold fish sandwiches or barbecue as a means to supplement his income. Blues musicians often played at such parties, supplying music for dancing. Carl Hodges performed at these parties up until the early 1950's, frequently in the company of other Gloucester or Middlesex County musicians such as Benny Sparks, Eli Roman or Roy Jackson. The parties would begin in the late afternoon or early evening and go until midnight or later. The musicians were paid \$5 or \$10 for their evening's work and received as much alcohol as they wanted.

The southern Tidewater counties also had similar parties, but blues musicians there enjoyed one different outlet. Because of the vast peanut fields spread throughout Suffolk, Surry, Southampton and Sussex Counties, markets were set up after every autumn's harvest. These markets occurred in all of the larger towns in this four county area and attracted many people who came to buy, sell and just enjoy the chance to fraternize. This yearly event also drew many musicians who came to make some money by entertaining the throngs. Blues singers such as Corner Morris and his friends travelled to the nearby peanut market in Suffolk each year to perform. The markets were a superb outlet for blues and other forms of entertainment like medicine shows

and country string bands because of the abundance of money and the number of people concentrated in one area. This phenomenon was repeated throughout the South, in cotton markets in Memphis and at tobacco sales each fall in Danville, Virginia.

One outlet for blues that may well be unique to Tidewater Virginia occurred at quartet contests. Such contests were primarily held in the Norfolk area and were most popular during the 1920's and 1930's. The music was performed by four *a capella* singers using techniques such as syncopation, antiphony and four part harmony. The roots of these quartets lie in the folk and popular music of the post Civil War era, when Afro-American singing drew from the current ragtime craze, spirituals and the formal Europeanized hymns. Vocal quartets became popular by the 1890's and many of the predominately black colleges in the South (such as Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, and Morris Brown in Atlanta) had quartets that continued until the 1920's when they were recorded by commercial record companies. Hampton Institute had a quartet from the 1880's until the 1940's. Such quartets were almost always associated with a style of singing religious music known as "jubilee" singing, named after the famous Fisk University Jubilee Singers who began in the 1870's.

By the early 1920's, there was an astounding

Photo Courtesy Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia

¹²See Bill Ferris, *Blues From The Delta* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1978), 99-157, for a discussion of blues in this context.

number of black quartets in the greater Norfolk area, many of which had the good fortune to record during the 1920's and 1930's. The first group to go into the studios, the Norfolk Jubilee/Jazz Quartet, in March 1921 went on to record over 120 sides for Paramount, Okeh and Decca, and two of their performances are included on this record (Side 1, Band 3 and Side 2, Band 5). Other area groups to record at this time include the Palmetto Quartet, the Excelsior Quartet of Portsmouth and the Monarch Quartet of Norfolk (almost certainly a pseudonym for the Norfolk Quartet).

The repertoires of these groups appear, at least from their recordings, to be quite broad. The Excelsior Quartet, for example, recorded popular songs, "Down By The Old Mill Stream" and minstrel show tunes, "Roll Them Bones," along with blues and religious songs. The same breadth is true of the Norfolk Jubilee Jazz Quartet, and their legacy of 48 secular sides stands as the single most convincing evidence of the popularity of the "jazz" (secular) style of music. It is the style of quartet singing that influenced the suave popular vocal groups of the late 1930's such as the Andrews Sisters. Afro-American quartet singing

from this period also forms the basis for the black and white *a capella* groups, such as the Flamingos and the Ravens, that rose to prominence with rhythm and blues hits during the late 1940's and early 1950's.

Willie Johnson, who began singing with the Golden Gate Quartet during the early 1930's, recalls:

At that time kids didn't have much to do. And the going thing with most kids or young adults was to form some sort of singing aggregation. That way, like it the church would have programs during the evening, then they could go there and sing. Then it became a case of competing with other groups. And in Tidewater there was a million of them!¹³

Most of the Norfolk area quartets sang in churches on Sunday, but many also competed at contests during the week. These contests were staged at local theaters and community halls with a small 10¢ to 25¢ admission levied to cover the buildings' rental and provide prize money for the competing groups. The contests were judged by people, (often singers themselves,) familiar with quartet singing and were based solely on the performance of religious singing. In many cases, however, these

events were preceded by quartets singing secular songs. This type of jazz singing could also be heard in other contexts such as peoples homes and on street corners. Smith can recall many quartet contests in Norfolk which were preceded by jazz singing (including blues songs) by such groups as the Norfolk Jazz Quartet and the Four Pennies. Although these quartets did not share in the prize money, such appearances provided them with exposure within the community and helped those who recorded to boost their record sales.

Live performances within their natural context, such as for family members, peers or neighbors are, as previously noted, the essence of the blues tradition. Records clearly influenced the music of many Tidewater blues musicians, especially ones like Pernell Charity who lived in a town where few other blues singers performed. Blind Boy Fuller, Lightnin' Hopkins, Josh White and Blind Lemon Jefferson, all popular "race" record artists who recorded between 1926 and the early 1950's, helped shape the blues music in Tidewater. Local musicians listened to these records and sometimes attempted to copy them. Most of the time, however, a more important source of inspiration were the other local musicians.

Traditional music is generally learned from members of one's community, and this is certainly true for blues musicians in Tidewater. Carl Hodges, for example, picked up ideas from his grandfather, Carl Hodges Sr., who lived just down the road from his grandson in Saluda. Carl also learned from two other men, Eli Roman and Roy Jackson, in Middlesex County. Henry Harris, born in Albemarle County, was first exposed to banjo and guitar playing by his father and uncles. The older blues and gospel musicians around Caroline County were the direct inspiration for John Cephas, just as they were for Corner Morris in Suffolk County. It is clear from this brief list that it is generally the older members of one's family or community who pass on their skills to the younger members, thus passing the music on to the succeeding generations to perform.

Because traditional blues is usually learned from older members of a community, it often displays specific regional or local traits. These traits are caused by a number of factors including settlement patterns, geographical variables and economic stratification. These variations occur in the singer's repertoire, guitar style (including tunings) and preferred vocal tone. Even within a specific region or section, blues musicians display unique approaches to their music. Extensive fieldwork by David Evans in Mississippi and Bruce Bastin and Pete Lowry in Georgia and the Carolinas shows that smaller "cells" of blues musicians exist.¹⁴



Excelsior Quartet

¹³Unpublished interview with Willie Johnson by Doug Suroff, Los Angeles, California, January, 1979.

¹⁴Bruce Bastin, *Crying for the Carolinas* (London: Studio Vista, 1971) and David Evans, *Tommy Johnson* (London: Studio Vista, 1970).



Photo Courtesy Tom West, Birdsong Peanut Co., Suffolk, Virginia

Harvesting peanuts with a 1948 "pea picker" machine.

Tidewater Virginia provides a convenient and logical geographical area to focus upon. Yet even within this nine-county area, there are individual musical personalities and styles present. William Moore provides one such example. Moore was well respected around Tappahanock as a fiddle and piano player, but it was his deft touch as a ragtime and blues guitarist that was captured by Paramount Records in 1927. It is difficult to know, because of the lack of recordings by other blues players from Richmond County, whether Moore was representative of a local style or a brilliant idiosyncratic musician. It is clear, however, that his approach to music was vastly different than any other recorded examples from

Tidewater. The vocal quartet blues, discussed previously, illustrates another sound distinctive to Tidewater and found in one specific section of the area. The intent of BRI 006, therefore, is to give an historical overview of blues music in Tidewater and offer a cultural and sociological framework for understanding the music.

Blues As Found in Piedmont and Western Virginia

Our knowledge of blues traditions in other sections of the state comes primarily from commercial phonograph records and recent field recordings. Luke Jordan, born in 1892, was probably the first Virginia folk blues musician to

record. He lived in or around Lynchburg most of his life and is most often recalled by contemporaries as a street musician. Late in life, Jordan became an alcoholic and seems to have died under impoverished circumstances in 1952. In his prime, however, he recorded for the Victor Company in 1927 and 1929. These records demonstrate that he was a skilled singer and guitarist with a feeling for highly personal compositions. Two of these recordings, "My Gal's Done Quit Me" and "Won't You Be Kind," are available on BRI 003 "Western Piedmont Blues."¹⁵

Further to the southwest, several other Virginians recorded during the same period. These men actively performed in the coal camps in the

¹⁵For further information see Don Kent, "On The Trail of Luke Jordan," *Blues Unlimited* 66 (October 1969), 4-6.

mining areas of Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia during the 1920's and into the 1930's. Harry Gay of Gate City, Virginia, and Stephen Tarter of Knoxville, Tennessee, often played for the weekend parties and gatherings held by the miners. In 1928, after playing together for several years, they recorded "Brownie Blues" and "Unknown Blues" for the Victor field recording unit set up in Bristol, Tennessee. These recordings have been reissued on Yazoo 1013 "The East Coast States."¹⁶ Carl Martin of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, was from the same region and era as Tarter and Gay. He also travelled throughout the area, often performing with a stringband or as part of a medicine show. Martin, a multi-instrumentalist, made his initial recordings in 1934 and remained musically active until his death in April, 1979.¹⁷

The 1930's were generally lean years for recording traditional blues, and the music in Virginia also went largely undocumented. The most significant documentation occurred in May, 1936, when John Lomax and Harold Spivacke spent several days recording inmates of the Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond. Lomax and Spivacke were working under the auspices of the Folk Song Archive of the Library of Congress on a major recording project which took them throughout the South. In Richmond they collected work songs, religious music, agrarian protest songs and three guitar-accompanied blues songs. The three songs have been released on Flyright 259 "Red River Runs," and several work song performances appear on BRI 007.

Following the second World War, many small record companies sprang into existence as the result of advances in technology and the eagerness of entrepreneurs to exploit the record market. This resulted in the chance for local musicians such as John Tinsley to record. Tinsley, born in Franklin County in 1920, began playing guitar at age 15 under the direction of a neighbor but soon came under the influence of the popular blues singers, Blind Boy Fuller and Buddy Moss, whose records he eagerly purchased. Tinsley performed locally for parties, dances and in church on Sundays, and in 1952 came to the attention of Dee Stone, owner of Mutual Records in nearby Bassett, Virginia. He and a friend, Fred Holland (also from Franklin County, Virginia) recorded two songs, "Truble Blues" (sic) and "Keep Your Hands Off Her," issued as Mutual M-213. Discouraged by the subsequent poor sales of his records and with the world of secular music, John turned exclusively to religious music in the mid-1950's. Recently, however, he has returned to

blues and this activity has been documented by an entire album on Outlet Records-1012 "Country Blues Roots Revived" and two selections on BRI 003 "Western Piedmont Blues." In addition, Mr. Tinsley has been broadcasting his music over WYTI, Rocky Mount, Virginia, in a half hour show on Saturday afternoons.¹⁸

Radio stations used to feature live programs with local musicians until the mid 1950's when they switched almost entirely to pre-recorded tapes, records and network programs. The live performances were usually sponsored by local companies and enjoyed loyal local audiences. WBLT in Bedford, Virginia featured at least one live program with a blues musician, James Lowry, who broadcast during the morning for several months 1953. Remarkably, six of his songs were recorded by the radio station and sent to the Library of Congress. These performances show he possessed a repertoire of religious, blues and non-blues secular dance tunes. BRI 003 "Western Piedmont Blues" presents three of the blues selections preserved by WBLT.

In more recent years, research by folklorists and blues scholars has unearthed more traditional blues singers in Piedmont and Western Virginia. The best known is John Jackson, a native of Rap-

pahannock County now residing in Fairfax. Mr. Jackson has recorded several albums for Arhoolie and Rounder Records and has made numerous appearances both in the United States and abroad.

Summary

It is clear from the information set forth in this essay that traditional blues remains a viable cultural entity in Tidewater Virginia. The music on this record must be considered as only one section of a larger geographic and stylistic region which includes Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia. These four states are linked because their traditional blues have certain elements in common. First, the singers prefer an unstrained vocal style emphasizing clear diction which results in unusual clarity of delivery, thus making them relatively easy to understand. Second, the guitar playing is unusually fluid and is marked by fairly sophisticated harmonic ideas. Southeast blues musicians also favor a "ragtime" two-finger picking style which gives their playing a regularly syncopated rhythm while retaining a relaxed feeling similar to ragtime piano and banjo playing from the turn of the century.

Tidewater blues contain these general traits and William Moore's two selections provide an ex-



James McMenamin crab fleet in Hampton Creek, 1907.

Photo Courtesy Syms-Eaton Museum, Hampton, Virginia

¹⁶Their careers have been documented by Kip Lornell, "Stephen Tarter," *Living Blues* 27 (June 1976) 18 and Roddy Moore and Kip Lornell, "Tarter and Gay Revisited," *Living Blues*, in Press.

¹⁷For more information see Pete Welding, "An Interview with Carl Martin," *78 Quarterly* No.2 (1968) and Kip Lornell and Roddy Moore, "On Tour With a Black String Band in the 1930s: Howard Armstrong and Carl Martin Reminisce," *Goldenseal*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (October 1976), 9-21, 46-52.

¹⁸See Kip Lornell, "John Tinsley," *Living Blues* No. 36 (January 1978), 9 & 11.

cellent example of this approach to music. Tidewater's blues heritage is set apart from the rest of the Southeastern blues musicians by the individual musician's creative impulses. This collection is unified by the area's geographical and cultural inheritance which works in conjunction with the individual approaches to their instruments, singing and composition. This blend of regional styles and personal approaches results in a unique document and an important reminder of the Afro-American contribution to Tidewater's culture.



Side 1

1. "Leaving You Mama..."—Carl Hodges, vocal and guitar. Recorded in Saluda (Middlesex County), Virginia, on March 3, 1979, by Kip Lornell, 3:11.

Carl Hodges is perhaps typical of a group of Afro-American folk musicians who came of age during the era just prior to the civil rights struggles beginning in the mid 1950's. This was a time when many rural roads were unpaved, farmers still used mules, and segregation was the social order. This group, which includes such fine musicians as Turner Foddrell of Stuart, Virginia (see BRI 001 and BRI 003), Willie Robertson of Plains, Georgia (see Southland SLP 5), and Guitar Shorty of Elm City, North Carolina (see Flyright LP 500 and Trix LP 3306), was all born around 1930, and most of them began playing music in the early to mid 1940's. Blues and other forms of black folk music were still widely circulated by way of oral tradition at that time. It seems evident from field research by David Evans, George Mitchell, Pete Lowry, and others over the past decade that Carl Hodges and his contemporaries are the last generation to play blues in great numbers. The country blues tradition is hardly dead in Virginia, however, and some younger blacks have continued on. Richard Wright from Bedford County, Virginia, provides one fine example, and he can be heard on BRI 003.

"Leaving You Mama..." is typical of the uncomplicated, straightforward approach Carl Hodges takes toward blues. Carl first heard this song in the 1940's when it was performed by a now-forgotten local musician. Carl's performance provides a good illustration of an improvised blues based on the theme of a broken romance caused by mistrust and uncertainty.

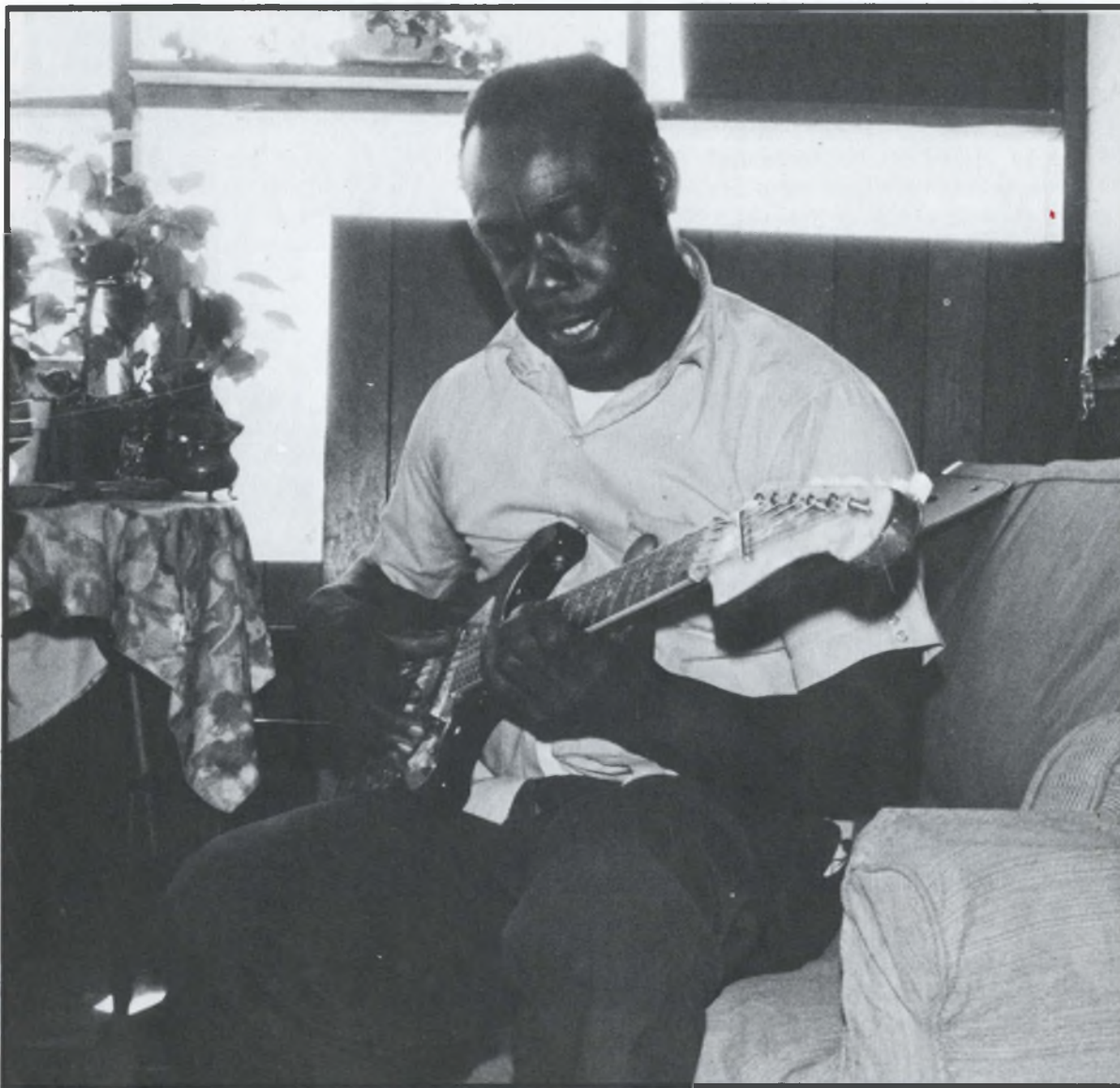


Photo by Kip Lornell

Carl Hodges

*I'm leaving you, mama, but I sure don't want to go.
Leaving here, baby, sure don't want to go.
Way I love you, mama, nobody ever know.*

*Call you in the morning, call you late at night.
Call you in the morning, baby, call you late at night.
Everytime I call you, mama, seems like things ain't right.*

*That's why I'm leaving here, mama, but I sure don't want to go.
Leaving here, mama, but I sure don't want to go.
Well the way I love you, mama, nobody ever know.*

Spoken: All I can tell you, baby . . .

*Well, I'm leaving you, baby, but I sure don't want to go.
Leaving you, baby, but I sure don't want to go.
Way I love you, mama, nobody ever know.*

Spoken: Smile, baby, 'cause I'm gone.

2. "Albemarle County Rag"—Henry Harris, guitar. Recorded in Newport News, Virginia, on March 8, 1979, by Kip Lornell, 1:19.

Henry Harris was born in Warren, Virginia, on March 25, 1915, and first heard blues and string band music for dances as a child. It was, in fact, the string band music that Mr. Harris listened to most as he grew up. Two of his uncles, William Harris (fiddle) and Charlie Harris (banjo), and his older brother, Nathan Harris (guitar), played music together for dances in the Warren and Scottsville section of Albemarle County. When Henry began playing guitar in the late 1920's, he tried to imitate the other guitar players in these string bands.

During this same period, the wind-up "Vic-

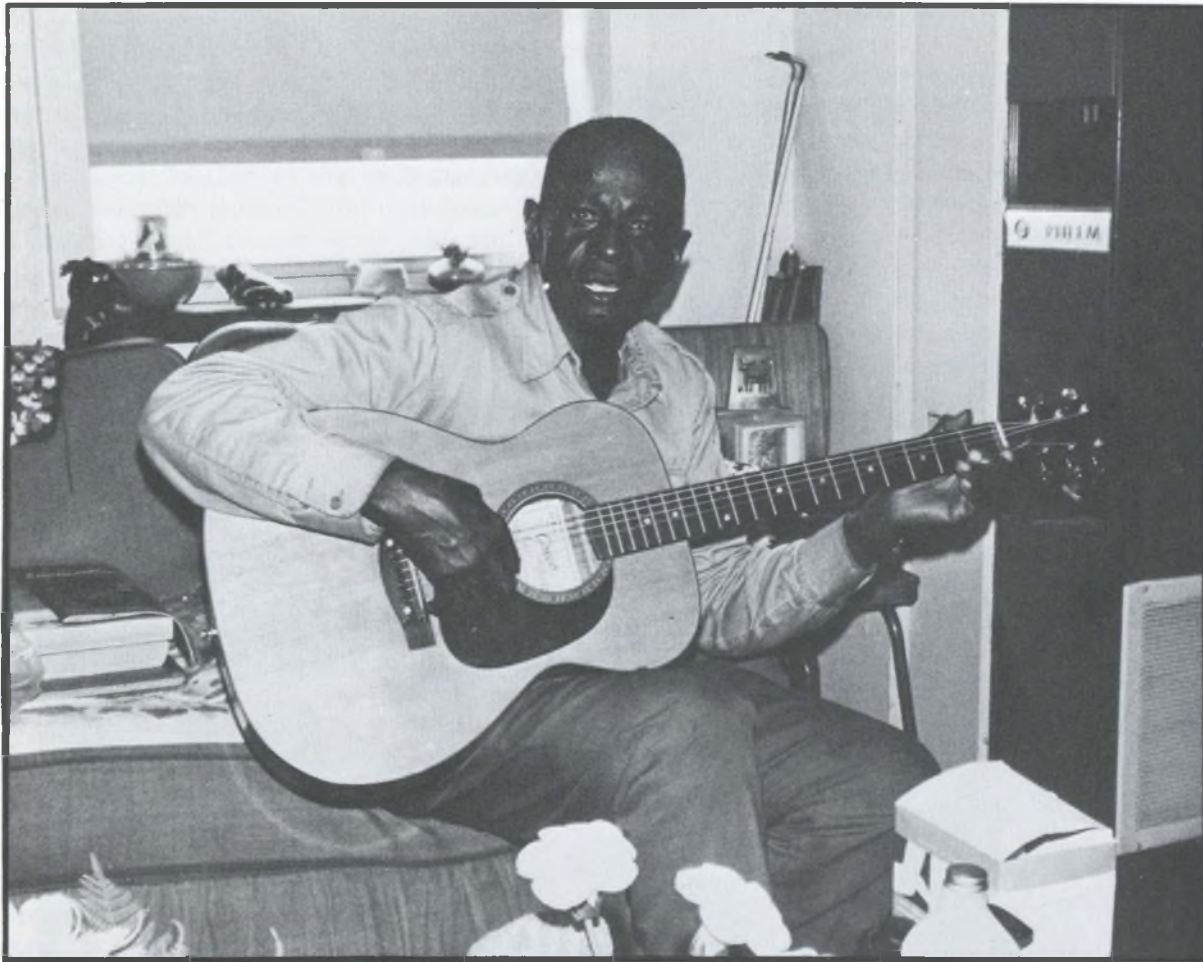


Photo by Kip Lornell

Henry Harris

trolas" which played 78 RPM records began to appear in local homes. These recordings supplemented the repertoires of many musicians including Henry Harris who recalls learning songs from records by Jimmy Rodgers, Pappa Charlie Jackson, Riley Puckett and Gene Autry. Thus, along with the blues and dance tunes, Mr. Harris performed many songs usually associated with Anglo-American traditions such as "The Death of Floyd Collins" and "Wreck of Old 97."

"Albemarle County Rag" is Henry's interpretation of a tune he heard played by local musicians during the late 1920's and early 1930's. It is a straightforward eight bar blues illustrative of the early blues and country dance tunes performed throughout Virginia and North Carolina. Such guitar pieces were played in homes for dances which occurred throughout the area each weekend. Mr. Harris remembers learning this tune from a friend of his uncle.

3. "I'd Feel Much Better"—The Virginia Four ("Crip" Harris, tenor; Delrose Hollins, baritone; Otto Tuston, lead; and Len Williams, bass). Recorded in New York City on August 23, 1939, by the Decca Company (Decca 7808), 2:27.

This group was better known as the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet. Under this name, they recorded nearly 150 sides for Okeh, Paramount and Decca between 1921 and 1940. This specific record, which is from their last known session, is coupled with "Queen Street Rag," one of the finest vocal quartet sides from the pre-war era. James Johnson, who formed the Peerless Four Quartet of Norfolk in 1919, recalls that the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet formed at roughly the same time and continued to sing in the area until just after World War II. None of the members of the group are believed to be alive today.

"I'd Feel Much Better" is the clearest *double-entendre* blues recorded by the group. Its content is very much in keeping with other similar recordings by such contemporary "hokum" blues artists as Frankie "Half-Pint" Jaxon, Bo Carter or Washboard Sam. These artists recorded a mixture of "hard" blues performances and lively, slightly pornographic songs such as "Wet It," "Let Me Roll Your Lemon," and "Easy Ridin' Mama." These records were extremely popular when The Virginia Four recorded "I'd Feel Much Better" and fit in with the popular trend advanced by the Vocalion, Bluebird, and Decca companies' artists.

Beedle bee bum bum bum bum bum.
Had an Old Lizzie, put her in the yard.
I couldn't get her started 'cause she cranked too hard.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

Poor old Lizzie was a good old soul.
She made 80 miles an hour with the crank in the hole.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

Run Lizzie girl, when she does it at all.
Lizzie'd get hot and cool my soul.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

Ey, um, oh my soul. It's eh, um, oh my soul. It's ey, um,
oh my soul.
And I would feel much better if I could get the crank in the
hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

She rides very easy, I want it strictly understood.
I got it all in and it sure cranks good.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

I said it's come here Lizzie, looking awful sweet.
Won't you let your daddy ride in your rumble seat.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

I said we sitting down here, sitting all alone.
Come on baby, let's go on home.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

Ey, um, oh my soul, It's eh, um, oh my soul, It's ey, um, oh
my soul.
And I would feel much better if I could get the crank in the
hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

Had an old Lizzie, put her in the yard.
I couldn't get her started 'cause she cranked too hard.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

Lat dat dat, la dat dat dat,
Dah dah, lat dah dah.
It's eh, oh my soul, it's uhm, oh my soul.
I'd feel much better if I could get the crank in the hole.
Just the crank in the hole.

Uh!

4. "Blind Love"—Pernell Charity, vocal and guitar. Recorded in Waverly (Sussex County), Virginia, on October 31, 1972, by Pete Lowry from Trix Records, 2:52.

Pernell Charity was a quiet unassuming man born in Waverly on November 20, 1920. Except for a short period of time in New York City in the late 1940's, Mr. Charity spent his entire life in the Waverly area. He worked primarily at construction jobs but was forced to retire in 1970 because of a back injury. From that time until his death on April 12, 1979, of cancer, Pernell lived in a small house behind a noxious-smelling sawmill on Robert Wilkins Avenue.

His music was shaped by the popular blues records from the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's, and the local musicians he heard playing at house parties and weekend gatherings. "Blind Love" is based on a 1953 recording by B.B. King (issued on RPM 395). The text of Pernell's version follows the original quite closely and is a fine example of a thematic/stable blues composition. Although Pernell often utilized lyrics and themes found on records, his interpretations are hardly slavish imitations. He was quite adept at adopting material and changing it to suit his own musical personality. Many such fine examples can be heard on Trix 3309 "The Virginian," including "Black Rat Swing" (Little Son Joe), "Mamie" (Blind Boy Fuller), "Richmond Blues" (Bull City Red), and "Dig Myself A Hole" (Arthur Crudup). The version of "Blind Love" on the Trix album is an alternate take to the one issued here.

Yes, I was standing at my window, tears running all down my cheeks

Poor me was standing at my window, tears running down my cheeks

I could see that woman I really loved, stopping every man in the world she meets.

Then I started to screaming, "Lord, what wrong have I done?"

Poor me started to screaming, "Lord, what wrong have I done?"

Every woman that I gets, she want some other one.

*Yes, I was standing on that corner, between 35th and Main.
Poor me was standing on that corner, between 35th and Main.
Blind man walked up and took my woman, and he even called her name.*

He says, "Aw, baby I'm blind, you brought eyesight and made me see."

He says, "Aw, baby I'm blind, brought eyesight and made me see."

Lord, that blind man asked a question, "Now who can your rider be?"

Yes, I was standing out there trembling with my head down in my hands.

Poor me was standing there trembling with my head down in my hands.

Lord, I know that woman going to say, "Lord, I ain't got no man."

5. "Barbershop Rag"—William Moore, vocal and guitar. Recorded in Chicago, Illinois, in January, 1928, by the Paramount Record Company (Paramount 12649), 2:53.

William Moore was born in Tappahanock, Virginia on March 3, 1893, and lived there or in nearby Warsaw until the mid-1940's. He was a barber by profession, and his older relatives still living in the area recall he also farmed to supplement his income. Warsaw is the last town he worked in during the 1940's, and his barbershop there was torn down about ten years ago in a "downtown renewal" project. The land stands empty today. Moore moved up to Warrenton, Virginia, right after World War II to live with his son. He was in declining health at the time and died in Warrenton of a heart attack on November 22, 1951.

Moore's trade is celebrated in "Barbershop Rag." Farming is probably the most common theme for occupational blues, and Wade Walton's recordings in the early 1960's (Bluesville 1060) are the only other blues recordings I am aware of that focus upon barbering. Two of the terms in "Barbershop Rag," bob and strap, are not in current usage and may need clarification; bob refers to a specific hair style in vogue among women in the mid 1920's, while strap means to sharpen. Moore's commentary is supported by an uncomplicated though highly embellished guitar part. His right hand technique is quite sophisticated and is approached on this album only by John Cephas.

Spoken: Oh, barber Moore on the barber. Only barber in the world can shave you and give you music while he's doing it. Oh, set 'em barber Moore, set 'em. Strap that razor barber, strap it. That's strappin' that razor, boy, strap it. Next! Fresh water, fresh. Next! Close shave, barber, close shave. Don't want no medium or no light shave. Don't want no Riley. Shave 'em close barber, shave 'em close. Ah, do it! Ah, set on 'em boys, set on 'em. Oh, give it a keen edge. Strap that razor again, boy. Strap that razor. That's strappin' that razor, butcher. I mean with a razor edge. A keen edge! Brush, boy, brush. Shine that man's shoes boy, shine 'em. Ah, give 'em a feather edge, boy. Ah, bob this gal's hair. Don't curl it, bob it. Ah, no wonder the browns come here to get their hair bobbed. Because barber Bill knows how to do it.

6. "King Kong Blues"—The Back Porch Boys (Alec Seward, vocal and guitar and Louis Hayes, guitar). Recorded in New York City in 1950 by the Apollo Record Company (Apollo 392), 2:51.

Alec Seward and Louis Hayes were immigrants from the southeastern states who followed the typical migration route utilized by many blacks from the early 1900's onward. Many of

their contemporaries ended up in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, or Philadelphia, but Seward and Hayes settled in New York City. Seward was born in Charles City County, Virginia, on March 16, 1901, but grew up in Newport News. He was greatly influenced by the music he heard his brother and other local musicians perform. In the mid 1920's Seward moved to New York City and was part of a large contingent of blues musicians from the Carolinas which included Sonny Terry, Blind Gary Davis, Brownie McGhee, Ralph Willis and others. Seward was active as a musician during most of his time in New York City playing for house parties and dances. He first recorded in the late 1940's and through his contacts with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee secured a recording session in 1965 that resulted in an entire album for Prestige/Bluesville. Except for a brief stay in Baltimore during the mid-1950's, Seward remained in New York City until his death on May 11, 1972.

Far less is known about Louis Hayes. According to Seward, Hayes was from Asheville, North Carolina, where he was born just before World War I. The two men played together for about 10 years until Hayes reportedly either turned to the ministry or died in the late 1950's. His recorded legacy consists of many sides recorded with Seward that show he was a capable musician.

Yeah, me and my baby, we don't get along no more.

Yeah, me and my baby, we don't get along no more.

'Cause she keeps me worried and I'm wandering from door to door.

My baby treats me so ungrateful that my heart bound to turn to stone.

Yes, my baby treats me so ungrateful that my heart bound to turn to stone.

Well I'm hoping some day that my baby lets poor me alone.



Alec Seward

*She leaves me in the morning and stays out all night long.
Yeah, she leaves me in the morning and she stays out all
night long.
And when she comes home in the morning, she's got a bottle
full of that old King Kong.*

*If you can't do no better, please let me know today.
If you can't do no better, please let me know today.
You know you treat me so bad, till you drive poor Alec
away.*

**7. "Black Rat Swing"—John Cephas, vocal
and guitar. Recorded in Bowling Green
(Caroline County), Virginia, on September
17, 1977, by Kip Lornell, 3:04.**

The popularity and widespread dissemination of "Black Rat Swing" is no doubt due to the enormous success of the original version, recorded by Ernest Lawlers (also known as Little Son Joe) in December, 1941. Lawlers was at the time the husband of the well-known blues musician, Memphis Minnie, a recording artist of great power who enjoyed a lengthy recording career from the late 1920's until the early 1950's. She and Lawlers were married during the late 1930's and early 1940's and often recorded together during that period. Most versions of "Black Rat Swing" can be traced directly to the original recording, and John Cephas' rendition is no exception. The vocal phrasing and inflections are clearly John's own, but the guitar work owes a great deal to the original.



John Cephas

*Lord, there's rats in my kitchen, eating up all my bread.
When I come home, eating all in my bed.
Lord, you one black rat, someday I'm going to find your little
trail.
Lord, I'm going to hide my shoes somewhere beneath your
shirt tail.*

*Lord, you done told me that you loved me, told me a
lie.
But I still love you, babe, until the day I die.
Lord, you one black rat, someday I'm going to find your
little trail.
Yeah, I'm going to hide my shoes somewhere beneath your
shirt tail.*

*Well now, here you come, wearing your flaggin's.
I've left woman, I ain't coming back.
Yes, you one black rat, someday I'm going to find your
little trail.
Lord, I'm going to hide my shoes somewhere beneath your
shirt tail.*

*Well now, here you come, wearing your blue.
I got another woman and I don't want you.
Lord, you one black rat, yeah, someday I'm going to find
your little trail.
Lord, I'm going to hide my shoes somewhere beneath your
shirt tail.*

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Pernell Charity—"Black Rat Swing"—Trix
3309
Lightnin' Hopkins—"Black Cat"—Kent KST-
700
Little Son Joe—"Black Rat Swing"—Okeh 06707
(Blues Classics 1)



Photo by Kip Lornell

Corner Morris

**8. "Going Down The Road Feeling
Good"—Corner Morris, guitar. Recorded in
Suffolk, Virginia, on March 26, 1979, by Kip
Lornell, 2:03.**

Songs with titles such as "Lonesome Road Blues" or "Going Down The Road Feeling Bad" have been collected by folk song researchers since the early part of this century. These songs are part of both Afro-American and Anglo-American tradition and along with "Poor Boy Blues" and "Red River Blues," constitute some of the earliest folk blues themes. Corner Morris' tune varies between an eight and twelve bar form, and he claims this is the "older" way of playing the song. This statement is supported by the right hand technique Mr. Morris uses. Although it is slightly affected by his age, Corner's picking style suggests something of the country dance tune tradition that was also prevalent when he learned this song in the early 1920's.

Corner Morris was born in Suffolk County on May 22, 1905, and began playing guitar in approximately 1920. His repertoire consists mostly of secular music including blues and non-blues songs such as "Old Blue," "Jesse James" and "Railroad Bill." Much of his music was learned from a cousin, James Moore, and two neighbors, Sam Scott and Gavin Jones. Mr. Jones is still alive but is no longer an active musician. Several years ago, Mr. Morris retired from farming and now works weekends as a watchman at the Suffolk Lumber Company. He still keeps a fine electric guitar around his home and plays occasionally. Guitar playing, however, is pretty much an activity of the past, and anymore, he rarely plays outside his home.

Photo Courtesy National Council for the Traditional Arts, Washington, D.C.

1. "War Blues"—Pernell Charity, vocal and guitar. Recorded in Waverly (Sussex County), Virginia, on October 25, 1972, by Pete Lowry for Trix Records, 2:49.

Topical songs are an important part of the blues tradition and are discussed at great length in Paul Oliver's *Screening The Blues* (Cassell Press, 1968). World War II generally and the Pearl Harbor sneak attack specifically generated many topical blues songs. The most influential of these was probably Dr. Clayton's "Pearl Harbor Blues," recorded on March 27, 1942, and issued on Bluebird B9003. "War Blues" belongs to this genre and as far as can be researched is an original composition. While most blues songs about World War II and the Korean War tend to be vehemently patriotic and pro-American, "War Blues" evokes a fatalistically pensive mood. Only J.B. Lenoir's "Korea Blues" is similar in this respect.

"War Blues" was one of several original songs in Mr. Charity's repertoire. Their inspiration is both from oral tradition and Pernell's creativity. This is especially evident on "Blind Lemon's Blues," a song with powerful lyrics and guitar work highly reminiscent of Texan Otis Harris. "Pig Meat Mama" is yet another song Pernell seems to have extracted from oral tradition to make an original blues. All these songs can be heard on Trix 3309. The "War Blues" heard here is a different version than the one issued on the Trix album.

The unusual guitar timbre heard on "War Blues" is caused by the use of a steel-bodied National guitar and provides a sharp contrast to Pernell's relaxed vocal. Many blues musicians used these guitars because they produced a greater volume of sound than the conventional hollow-bodied wooden guitars. Their use seemed especially prominent among musicians who worked the streets, such as one of Pernell's favorite recording artists, Blind Boy Fuller.

*Well I got my questionnaire boys and my class card, too.
Now I've got to leave here, what am I going to do?
I got to go, to the war, if I have bad luck, I won't be
back at all.*

*Don't mind being drafted, don't mind being in line.
Ain't but the one thing killing me, leave these girls behind.
I got to go, to the war, if I have bad luck, I won't be back
at all.*

I got to go, to the war, if I have bad luck . . .

*When I get my call boys, here's what I'm going to do.
I'm going to get me a black cat bone, way down in my shoe.
I got to go, to the war, if I have bad luck, I won't be back
at all.*

*Well, I don't mind beind drafted, don't mind being in line.
Ain't but the one thing killing me, leaving these girls behind.
I've got to go, oh yeah, if I have bad luck, I won't be back
at all.*

Yeah!



Pernell Charity

Photo by Kip Lornell

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Big Bill—"In The Army Now"—Okeh 0661
The Five Breezes—"My Buddy Blues"—Bluebird
B-8614 (New World NW 290)
Sonny Boy Williamson—"War Time
Blues"—Bluebird B-8610

2. "Blues"—Big Boy, vocal and guitar. Recorded in Hampton, Virginia, in 1941 by Roscoe Lewis, 4:34.

The precise identity of Big Boy is completely unknown. He was recorded by Roscoe Lewis under the auspices of Hampton Institute as part of a project Lewis undertook to document local Afro-American folklore. Other material was recorded by Big Boy, but "Blues" was his only secular recording besides a rather commonplace version of "John Henry."

By any standard, "Blues" is a masterful, powerful performance. Big Boy's slide technique and resonating vocals are quite striking and evoke the sound of the Texas gospel musician Blind Willie Johnson. "Blues" also calls to mind some of Furry Lewis's recordings from the late 1920's. Because it is a railroad song and *cante-fable*, "Blues" is most reminiscent of Lewis's "Kassie Jones—Parts 1 and 2" (Victor 21664, reissued on Yazoo 1050). Even with these comparisons in mind, Big Boy's performance stands on its own as a highly individualistic, unique work.

Spoken: I was travelling south a few years ago on a hobo trip. Slow flying freight, come up through the yard, she always toll her bell in the yard. Gets nearer the crossing. She always gives four blows on the whistle, which is two longs and two shorts. When she got near the crossing, I thought I'd catch the freight. I caught the freight when she stopped. Conductor came over, he was a Christian man, here's the song I picked for him.

*Sung: Nearer my god to thee, nearer to thee.
Nearer my god to thee, nearer to thee.
Nearer my god to thee, nearer my god to thee.
Nearer my god to thee, nearer to thee.*

Spoken: He passed me up and the brakeman come along. The brakeman says, "I am a blues man." Quite naturally when you get a long ways from home, you catch the blues, and here's the blues I played for the brakeman.

*Sung: Ever been down, you know just 'bout how I feel.
You ever been down, know 'bout how I feel.
Like a soldier lying here on some battlefield.*

*. . . had it all my days.
Trouble, trouble, had it all my days.
Yes, trouble, trouble, had it all my days.
Lord, I believe to my soul, it'll bother me to my grave.*

*Um, baby, scream this lonesome song.
Won't you run here baby, scream this lonesome song.
Won't you run here baby, scream this lonesome song.
'Cause I'm worried and troubled and don't know what to do.*

*Lord, I'm standing here wondering will a matchbox hold my clothes.
Lord, I'm standing here wondering will a matchbox hold my clothes.
Lord, I'm standing here wondering will a matchbox hold my clothes.
For haven't got so many, but got so far to go.*

*I'm Georgia raised, but sweet Alabama bound, Lord.
I'm Georgia raised, sweet Alabama bound.
Georgia raised, but I'm sweet Alabama bound.
There ain't no need of talking and that's no way to do.*

3. "Sweet Woman Blues"—The Back Porch Boys (Alec Seward, vocal and guitar and Louis Hayes, guitar). Recorded in New York City in 1950 by the Apollo Record Company (Apollo 406), 2:54.

In a number of ways this performance is typical of the many duets recorded by Seward and Hayes during the late 1940's and early 1950's for the small independent companies in and around New York City. These recordings, often issued under pseudonyms such as Blues King, Guitar Slim and Jelly Belly, or Slim Seward and Fat Boy Hayes, featured their relaxed tasteful guitar work and, most frequently, Alec Seward's forceful vocals. Their records tended towards slow or medium tempo songs with themes that ranged from the traditional ("Betty and Dupree") to songs concerned with the plight of recently immigrated urban blacks ("Working Man Blues"). The theme of "Sweet Woman Blues" is a conventional one with deep roots in oral tradition. The third verse, for example, has been recorded at least twice before by Sam Collins ("Devil In The Lion's Den") and Texas Alexander ("Water Bound Blues") during the 1920's.

Both "King Kong Blues" and "Sweet Woman Blues" begin at slower tempos than they end with. This tendency to rush tempos is not unique to Seward and Hayes and is found in the recordings by such highly regarded downhome blues singers as Frank Edwards, Little Hat Jones and Jaydee Short. Another aspect of "Sweet Woman Blues" that is typical of the two men's work is its harmonic and rhythmic regularity. Most of their recorded duets are precisely twelve bars in length with 2/4 or 4/4 time signatures.

*Ah, she's a sweet woman and I want everybody to know.
Ah, she's a sweet woman and I want everybody to know.
Ah, she spent fifty dollars for every suit I ever wore.*

*Yeah, she's tall and pretty, and the way I love her is a sin.
Ah, she's tall and pretty and the way I love her is a sin.
Ah, but she'd pitch a boogie woogie if I ask her where she been.*

*She got ways like the devil, act like she was born in some lions den.
She got ways like the devil, act like she was born in some lions den.
But her daily occupation taking other women's men.*

*Ah, she's a sweet woman and I want everybody to know.
Ah, she's a sweet woman and I want everybody to know.
Ah, everytime I get locked up she's right there to go my bail.*

4. "Motorcycle Swing"—Henry Harris, guitar. Recorded in Newport News, Virginia, on March 8, 1979, by Kip Lornell, 1:33.

This instrumental was learned at about the same time as "Albemarle County Rag," heard on the other side of this record. It is one of several blues-like dance tunes Mr. Harris heard while attending country dances in Albemarle County during the 1920's. "Motorcycle Swing" is an unadorned eight bar tune and its primary function was to provide music for dances such as "Ballin' The Jack," "The Sally Long" or the "Black Bottom."

The song's title is associated with Mr. Harris' passion for motorcycles which goes back to 1925. Henry moved from Warren, Virginia, to Richmond, Virginia, in 1936 and embarked on a career of motorcycle racing, repair and sales. He worked for the Tidewater Motorcycle Company in Richmond until they transferred him to Newport News where he has remained since 1940. In the bigger cities it has been easier for Henry to keep up with another of his interests, cowboy movies. He still enjoys both cowboy movies and motorcycles and one of his most valued possessions is a color photograph of himself in full cowboy regalia atop a motorcycle. Few of his neighbors, in fact, are aware of his legal name because to most people he is simply, "Cowboy."

5. "Pleading Blues"—Monarch Jazz Quartet of Norfolk. Unknown unaccompanied vocal quartet. Recorded in Richmond, Virginia, by the Okeh Record Company on October 15, 1929 (Okeh 8931), 2:40.

Nothing is known of the personnel and history of the Monarch Jazz/Jubilee Quartet of Norfolk. The only concrete information about them concerns the recordings they made for Okeh in 1929. In October and November of 1929, the Monarch Jazz/Jubilee Quartet did four sessions, one in Richmond, the other in New York City, in which they recorded thirteen sides. Nine of these are secular, and "Pleading Blues" comes from their initial session. There were several other Virginia-based vocal quartets recorded at this session including the Virginia Male Quartet, the Richmond Starlight Quartet and the Golden Crown Quartet. The latter group was based in Portsmouth.

There has been some speculation recently that the Monarch Jazz/Jubilee Quartet of Norfolk may actually be the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet. This theory has been expressed by Memphis State

University ethnomusicologist Dr. David Evans and quartet authority Doug Seroff and is based upon aural and discographical evidence. The discographical evidence comes from the fact that the Okeh session occurs approximately eight months after the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet terminated a seven year association with the Paramount Record Company and well before they started recording for Decca in 1937. It is entirely possible that Okeh and the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet decided they should record and the resulting sessions were released pseudonymously. The strongest aural evidence comes from James Johnson, co-founder of the Peerless Four of Norfolk. Mr. Johnson sang with the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet many times during the 1920's and 1930's. A tape of several Monarch Jazz/Jubilee sides were played for Mr. Johnson in July, 1979, and he unhesitatingly stated he was listening to the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet and that Len Williams was the bass singer.

While this body of information does not constitute irrefutable evidence, it does make a strong case. Only specific information from the Okeh session files could produce such evidence. This line of thought also helps to explain why none of the people intimately involved with the Norfolk area quartets from the 1920's and 1930's recall the Monarch Jazz/Jubilee Quartet.



Carl Hodges (guitarist) with members of his church.

*Oh Lord, pretty mama, ow, ow.
Oh Lord, pretty mama, ow, ow.
Oh Lord, pretty mama, won't you hear my plea?
Lord, lord, lord, lord.
Oh Lord, pretty mama, won't you hear my plea?
Won't you hear my plea.
And if you don't want your husband, mama, please take me.
Please take me.*

*I go to work every morning, and I want to lose no time.
Oh Lord, lose no time.
Go to work every morning and I want to lose no time.
And want to lose no time. And want to lose no time.
And I get paid on Saturday, spend most every dime,
every dime.*

*Now if you don't want me, please act like you do.
Ow pretty mama.
If you don't want me, please act like you do. Do, do
dododo.
'Cause I'll take some poison and I'll be through. I'll be
through.*

*Oh Lord, pretty mama, won't you hear my plea?
Oh . . . plea, mama.
Oh Lord, pretty mama, won't you hear my plea?
Won't you hear my plea? Won't you hear my plea?
And if you don't want your husband, mama, please take me.*

Improvised scat chorus

*Now if you don't want me, please act like you do.
Oh, please mama.
Oh mama please act like you do. Do dodolodo, do dodolodo.
'Cause I'll take some poison, and I'll be through.
I'll be through.*

6. "Poor Boy Blues"—Carl Hodges, vocal and guitar. Recorded in Saluda (Middlesex County), Virginia, on March 3, 1979, by Kip Lornell, 3:09.

The basic themes of this song have been previously examined by many blues musicians. The themes of loneliness and poverty occur frequently in blues, and "Poor Boys Blues" is a typical example of their treatment. Versions of this song have been collected many times by researchers interested in Afro-American folk music. Howard Odum, for example, included the following lines in his pioneering study "Folk-Songs and Folk Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes:"

*Poor Boy long ways from home.
I'm a poor boy long ways from home.
Poor boy long ways from home."*

It seems quite likely that the more rigidly constructed blues recorded by commercial companies during the 1920's and 1930's had their roots in songs such as this. As songs such as "Poor Boy," "Joe Turner" and "Thought I Heard That K.C. Whistle Blow" became more widely circulated, it appears they also became more standardized, finally emerging as something close to the three-line, twelve-bar AAB form commonly found today.

Carl Hodges' interpretation of "Poor Boy Blues" is quite loosely structured and unadorned. He rarely varies from the basic I, IV chord progression and alters the melody only slightly when taking a solo. Carl also occasionally deliberately neglects to finish singing a line and lets the guitar complete the line. This device is not uncommon among blues singers, and many musicians refer to it as "letting my guitar talk."

*Poor boy stood on the road and cried.
Poor boy stood on the road and cried.
Poor boy got no where to . . .*

*Poor boy, long ways from home.
Poor boy, long ways from . . .
Poor boy stood on the road and cried.*

*Poor boy don't know which away to go.
Poor boy don't know which away to go.
Poor boy stood on the road and cried.*

¹⁹ Journal of American Folklore, 24 (July-September, 1911.)

Poor boy, long ways from home.
Poor boy, long ways from home.
Poor boy got no where to go.

Poor boy stood on the road and cried.
Poor boy stood on the road and cried.
Poor boy got no where to go.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Gus Cannon—"Poor Boy, Long Ways From Home"—Paramount 12571/Broadway 5054 (Yazoo 1002)

John Dudley—"Po Boy Blues"—New World 252
Gabriel Brown & Rochelle French—"Po' Boy, Long Ways From Home"—L.C. AFS 454B (Flyright—Matchbox SDM 257)

7. "Richmond Blues"—John Cephas and John Woolfork, guitars and vocals. Recorded in Bowling Green (Caroline County), Virginia, on September 17, 1977, by Kip Lornell, 2:32.

John Cephas and John Woolfork grew up together in rural Caroline County during the 1930's and 1940's. Both men became interested in music after hearing local musicians such as James Taliferro perform at country dances. Their repertoires are typical of other middle-aged black folk musicians throughout Tidewater and include religious songs, country and western tunes, dance pieces and blues. Although Cephas moved to Washington, D.C. some years ago, he maintains a home in Bowling Green and often spends his weekends there. Woolfork, on the other hand, still lives in the house in which he was born and works in one of the local sawmills.

"Richmond Blues" is based on a recording of the same name done by Bull City Red (George Washington) for the American Record Company in July, 1935. Washington was a Durham, North Carolina-based washboard and guitar player who accompanied Blind Boy Fuller on several records as well as enjoying a short solo recording career. Cephas' and Woolfork's version, like the original, is an eight bar blues which typically follows an AB verse structure.

*I was standing down in Richmond, on the corner of Broad and Main.
Up walked two police, asked "Son, what is your right name?"*

*And I told him my name, yeah, was stamped on my shirt.
I'm a womanfolk's lover and I sure don't have to work.*

*I'm going to buy me a bulldog, an old shepard, two grey hounds.
I'm going to use these dogs just to run my good gal down.*

*I'm going to use these dogs just to watch me while I sleep.
Just to keep them men from making that early creep.*

*My little gal, she went away, she didn't even write to me.
Got my mind all worried like water in the deep blue sea.*

*Uh huh, uh huh, you know dogging ain't right.
If you want to dog me, I'm gonna run both day and night.*

*Well I'm going, going up town, I'm going to talk with that chief police.
Lord, my good gal's in trouble and I sure can't find no peace.*

*'Cause I feel, feel like snapping, honey, pistol in your face.
Lord, that lonesome graveyard be your resting place.*

*Graveyard, graveyard, it's a lowdown dirty place.
Lie flat on your back throw mud all in your face.*

Cephas: Woho, go ahead, John! Let me hear you sing a verse, John.

Woolfork: Hold it right there, Jack!

Cephas: Come on John, I wanna hear you sing a verse, man.

Woolfork: That's the Richmond Blues . . .

8. "One Way Gal"—William Moore, vocal and guitar. Recorded in Chicago, Illinois, in January, 1928, by the Paramount Record Company (Paramount 12648), 3:13.

William Moore is best remembered by his Richmond County neighbors as a barber and a man who provided music for the local dances. Surprisingly few of his contemporaries recall his guitar playing as often as they speak about his prowess on fiddle and piano. The apparent breadth of Moore's repertoire is hinted at through his recordings. These 1928 records include country dance tunes as well as blues, with "One Way Gal" perhaps being the finest. "One Way Gal" follows a slightly unusual AAAB verse structure, and William Moore elongates the musical pattern to form roughly a 14 bar blues. The emotional impact of this song is refreshingly positive and optimistic. Moore's ebullient performance stands in strong contrast to the usual women problems the blues so often address. In this respect it is similar to the Back Porch Boys' "Sweet Woman Blues."

*There's one thing I like about that gal of mine.
There's one thing I like about that gal of mine.
There's one thing I like about that gal of mine.
She treats me right and loves me all the time.*

*Sometimes I'm broke and blue as I can be.
Sometimes I'm broke and blue as I can be.
Sometimes I'm broke and blue as I can be.
But still my baby, she looks after me.*

*She walked in the rain till her feet got soaking wet.
She walked in the rain till her feet got soaking wet.
She walked in the rain till her feet got soaking wet.
And these are the words she said to every man she met.*

*"Mister, change a dollar and give me one lousy dime,
"Mister, change a dollar and give me one lousy dime,
"Mister, change a dollar and give me one lousy dime,
So I can feed this hungry man of mine."*

*She took me over to a cabaret.
She took me over to a cabaret.
She took me over to a cabaret.
I ate and drank and then I went away.*

*This gal of mine she's one way all the time.
This gal of mine she's one way all the time.
This gal of mine she's one way all the time.
She takes the blues away and satisfies my mind.*



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3. Lornell, Christopher. "Pre-Blues Black Music in Piedmont, North Carolina," *North Carolina Folklore Quarterly*, XXIII: 1 (February, 1975), 26-32. This article discusses some aspects of black secular folk music found in the southeastern United States prior to 1900, and focuses upon several Afro-American musicians in Orange and Alamance Counties who still perform his music.
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6. Russell, Tony. *Blacks, Whites and Blues.* Stein and Day, New York, 1970. Russell gives many song texts and historical information about non-blues secular black music in this study of the interrelationships between black and white folk music.
7. Scarborough, Dorothy. *On The Trail of Negro Folk-Songs.* Harvard University Press. Cambridge, 1925. This book contains several chapters citing numerous examples of non-blues secular black music, including many ballads. Most of the songs were collected in the deep South between approximately 1910 and 1923.



Oyster Shuckers, 1916.

Photo Courtesy Syms-Eaton Museum, Hampton, Virginia

8. *Old Virginia Blues*, Mamlish 3819. This state-wide sampler is made up of selections by Virginia blues musicians who recorded for commercial companies between 1928 and 1952 and includes Luke Jordan, Alec Seward, and John Tinsley.
9. *Red River Runs Flyright* 259. Library of Congress recorded material from the mid to late 1930's is presented here. Includes performances in eastern North Carolina and Virginia.
10. *Western Piedmont Blues*, BRI 003. The performances included on this record were recorded in a six-county region of Virginia between 1928 and 1978.



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Syms-Eaton Museum, Hampton, Virginia

**Cover Photo Courtesy: Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia*



SELECTED ANNOTATED DISCOGRAPHY

1. *Pernell Charity—The Virginian*, Trix 3309. This album contains 15 selections by this Waverly, Virginia, guitarist. The songs include Charity's own blues plus his interpretations of Arthur Crudup, Blind Boy Fuller, and others.
2. *Blind Boy Fuller 1935-1940*, Blues Classics 11. This record features 14 representative cuts by this North Carolinian who exerted an immense influence over Virginia blues musicians by way of his numerous 78RPM recordings.
3. *John Jackson—Blues and Country Dance Tunes From Virginia*, Arhoolie 1025. Jackson resides in Fairfax, Virginia, and has two other albums on Arhoolie (1035 and 1047) that feature his blues and folk material.
4. *Rabbit Muse—Muse Blues*, Outlet 1005. This is a blend of musical styles that spotlights Muse's versatility on kazoo and ukelele.
5. *Alec Seward—Saturday Evening Party*, Blue Labor 103. Seward was born and raised in Newport News, Virginia, and migrated to New York City in the late 1920's. These pieces were recorded during the 1960's in the company of Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee and others.
6. *John Tinsley—Country Blues Roots Revived*, Outlet 1012. This recording consists of 12 blues performed by this Henry County guitarist & singer. He is accompanied on most cuts by his son William on piano and J.P. Young on harmonica.
7. *East Coast Blues 1924-1935*, Yazoo 1013. This regional sampler contains several fine examples by Virginia musicians such as William Moore, Carl Martin and Tarter and Gay.