

Migration patterns showing movements of negroes from rural to urban settlements and from South to North and West have not only helped to interweave regional blues styles but have frequently concentrated artists from specific southern rural areas into certain cities. Obvious routes lie westwards from Texas and the Southwest into California; from the Deep South of the Mississippi bottomlands and Alabama to Chicago - perhaps the best documented of all - and from the southeastern states to New York.

All selections on this anthology typify the general drift from rural southern communities into the New York metropolis. Sometimes the rural roots are more in evidence but nowhere are the complete urban influences which dominated the blues in the city by the 1960s. These sides from the 1940s and 1950s show the breadth and wealth of musical talent in this city of supposed greater opportunity in the immediate postwar years - and the bulk reflect the gentle, lilting sounds of the southeastern states.

Some of the artists had moved into the city some time before they recorded there. Alec Seward has made his home there since 1924, although his first journey to the city was in 1922. From Newport News, Virginia, Seward recalls many fine artists from the Chesapeake Bay area (none of whom have ever been recorded) yet it was with the rough-voiced Louis Hayes, a guitarist from North Carolina, that he teamed up in 1947. Their two-guitar sides epitomise the relaxed and deceptively languid blues style of the Piedmont, issued as the Back Porch Boys, this pseudonym was merely one of many colourful ones that were used on their releases. Seward still plays on occasion when with his friends, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry and Larry Johnson, when they are in town but Hayes has become a minister in New Jersey. Leroy Dallas, originally from Alabama, played with Brownie McGhee in the 1930s and finally made it to New York by 1949. Best known of all the artists presented here is Brownie McGhee, who settled in New York in the mid-1940s, having commenced his recording career in the shadow of his mentor, Blind Boy Fuller in 1940. (See Flyright 105 for 7 sides of each). Despite the label of "Seaboard and Southern", McGhee is featured without Sonny Terry and shows well what a superb guitarist McGhee was. Perhaps overexposure and the fact that he fitted successfully into the folk circuit has diminished the respect shown him as a bluesman in many people's estimation. If his work is often superficial, it is also often very fine. It is time he was reappraised.

Gabriel Brown recorded for the Library of Congress in Florida in 1935 but by the 1940s he was part of the folky Greenwich Village set which included Leadbelly, McGhee, Sonny Terry and Alec Seward. However, he is an excellent bluesman and it is sad that he was never really fully recorded, though he made a number of sides for Joe Davis' label slightly earlier than this interesting and slightly amusing coupling. Tarheel Slim, christened Alden Bunn, comes from North Carolina and like many other bluesmen started out with a gospel group, the Selah Jubilee Singers, with whom he played and sang intermittently from 1947 until 1955. His two releases featured here - both as misprints of his real name - show differing facets of his style, which later became a successful pop sound for Bobby Robinson. "Too much competition" is very much in the mould of Blind Boy Fuller, who was his mother's favourite blues singer, while "45" features Sonny Terry, who worked with Fuller in North Carolina and recorded with him from 1937 to 1940, and the fine pianist Wilbert Ellis. Ellis still plays occasionally in Harlem when he is not working as a bartender. He cut three very obscure 78s in the 1940s and the side featured here was made in 1945 with Brownie McGhee on guitar, who may give the spoken introduction.

Alonzo Scales, a good friend of Tarheel Slim, seldom plays now. Here he is accompanied by McGhee and Terry, while the pianist is another of this small but tight-knit group of musicians from the 1940s and 1950s - Bob Gaddy. Square Walton is something of an enigma about whom no-one seems to recall anything. Numbers like "Pepper Head Woman" seem to be conscious covers of Lightnin' Hopkins; not in itself very surprising as many companies attempted this viz. Savoy with Carolina Slim. The Sonny Boy and Sam side is also obscure and the artists are not remembered by the remaining New York bluesmen from this period and it seems likely that they were never permanently in the city. Many other Piedmont artists of stature moved into the New York/New Jersey area in the same period - Blind Gary Davis from Greenville, South Carolina via Durham, North Carolina; harp player Buster Brown from central Georgia (whose 1945 Library of Congress sides Flyright is planning to issue as part of an LP of pre-war Library of Congress blues recorded in Georgia); Dennis McMillon from North Carolina; Ralph Willis, originally from Alabama but who absorbed so much of the Piedmont style in his short time in New York and briefly Richard Trice (see Flyright 4705), also from Durham, North Carolina.

A subsequent Flyright anthology will show the blues in New York, as they evolved in the 1960s, with little of the country origins revealed. On this present anthology, however, the sides show that in the same way as many of the immediate post-war recordings in Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago, they directly reflected the southern rural origins of their artists. Whereas some documentation exists, especially for Chicago, nothing has been done to show parallels on the East coast and the natural migration pattern from the southeastern states into New York. If Alec Seward reflects that this migration commenced during the boom of the First World War and the following period of economic expansion and overconfidence, when the rural southeastern countries were showing distinct depopulation patterns tied to the serious agricultural depression of the early 1920s, the chief influx of blues artists appears to have been during and immediately after the Second World War, again when a booming economy gave hitherto unparalleled opportunities for many negroes, especially with such a large proportion of the white labour force in uniform.

Understandably, the older country blues styles have begun to disappear in New York. They are still kept alive to some extent by such artists as Larry Johnson and Tarheel Slim, who is still playing around town. Many of the older artists have ceased to play regularly now but this does not mean necessarily that there is no-one left to play in that style. A number of leads are being followed up at the moment and it is hoped that more of this music can be documented before it finally does disappear from sight. Time is never on our side.

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