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THE Blues

COLLECTION

84



EAST COAST BLUES

THE Blues COLLECTION

PART 84 EAST COAST BLUES

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|-----------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1 WASH-BOARD CUT OUT | 8 ROLLIN' DOUGH BLUES | 13 PLAY MY JUKE BOX |
| 2 NINETY-NINE YEAR
BLUES | 9 SLIPPIN' AND SLIDIN' UP THE
GOLDEN STREET | 14 CAROLINA BLUES |
| 3 SOUTHERN RAG | 10 TOM BROWN SITS IN HIS | 15 DOWN IN THE BOTTOM |
| 4 IF I CALL YOU MAMA | PRISON CELL | 16 GAS RATION BLUES |
| 5 POOR JANE BLUES | 11 DEPRESSION'S GONE FROM ME | 17 I GOT WHAT MY DADDY LIKES |
| 6 TURKEY BUZZARD BLUES | BLUES | 18 A AND B BLUES |
| 7 PICK POOR ROBIN CLEAN | 12 WALKING AND LOOKING BLUES | 19 DON'T WANT PRETTY WOMEN |
| | 20 TAMPA BLUES | |

THE PUBLICATION

EAST COAST BLUES

997

The music of the eastern seaboard states of the USA was blessed with a distinctive light touch. Ragtime and finger-picking were among the dominant blues styles of such states as Virginia and North and South Carolina. Musicians from these states were often of an idiosyncratic nature and found commercial success difficult to come by. Their legacy is a trove of unexplored treasures.

THE DIDDIE WAH DIDDIE MAN

999

Little is known about Blind Blake's background or the details of his life despite his being one of the mainstays of the East Coast blues scene. He was rarely seen in public even at the height of his career. But there are no grey areas in his music: it is East Coast blues at its best.

FURTHER LISTENING

1005

The music of Blind Blake and other prominent eastern excellencies remains, despite its respectable age, remarkably well-preserved on a series of intriguing collections. The guitar work on these compilations is among the most beautiful to be found anywhere in the blues.

BLUES NOTES

1007

East Coast Blues is a unique collection, featuring some first-ever reissues of original numbers. Stunning imagery and intricate harmonies characterise the numbers collected here.

PLUS

THE STORY OF THE BLUES (84)

Back cover

After the initial postwar success of Chicago as a blues city, decline might easily have set in, but the blues scene revived in the 1980s, and remains as healthy as ever today.

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EAST COAST BLUES



Rag Pickers

The southeastern United States have a long blues history that's quite distinct from that of the Deep South or Texas. Here the blues are played with a light touch and a jaunty swing, and the music is delicately flavoured by ragtime and the hillbilly music from just across the tracks. Out of this soil sprang Blind Boy Fuller, Brownie McGhee & Sonny Terry and a great throng of lesser-known, richly rewarding musicians.

EAST COAST BLUES



FRONT COVER: Gabriel Brown moved to New York in the 1940s to play in Greenwich Village cafés.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Keb' Mo', the most prominent East Coast stylist in the 1990s.

ABOVE: East Coast bluesman Spark Plug Smith was named after a racehorse.

'East Coast blues' is one of those phrases that slip into bluespeak as serviceable shorthand terms but which, as soon as they're closely examined, become elusive. What it ought to mean is the music of the southeastern seaboard states: Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida. But the manner in which it's often used, in the titles of compilation albums for example, seems to act as an open invitation to blues artists from Alabama, East Tennessee, Kentucky...

The problem is that the term is employed to say something not only about geography but also about style.

'East Coast' tends to be pinned on almost any blues with a melodic, ragtime character, or blues influenced by hillbilly music.

PIEDMONT BLUES

Blues historian Bruce Bastin, author of *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, has tried to eliminate some of this vagueness by propagating the term 'Piedmont blues'. 'Piedmont' refers to the section of the Southeast 'between the mountain foothills and the coastal plain' taking in parts of Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia.

But this is an area of enough musical diversity to make any single definition

virtually useless. A great deal of Georgia blues, for instance, lacks those ragtime and hillbilly connections: for every artist who evinces them, like Blind Willie McTell, there's a 'hard' bluesman who doesn't, such as Barbecue Bob. So a condensed narrative like this must be highly selective, full of leaps and switches of direction, dangling with loose ends.

The north Georgia blues scene around Atlanta in the 1920s and 1930s (the era of Barbecue Bob and McTell, Curley Weaver and Peg Leg Howell), will not come into the story. This gap can be partly filled by reading the Blind Willie McTell issue of *The Blues Collection*.

Nor will much be said about Blind Boy Fuller, the dominant figure in the region during the 1930s, since he too has been the subject of an issue of *The Blues Collection*. Nevertheless, his

THE DIDDIE WAH DIDDIE MAN

Arthur Blake, he called himself on a record. Paramount Records said that he came from Jacksonville, Florida. He spent a few years in the 1920s living in Chicago. That virtually sums up the hard data about one of the outstanding musicians of the early blues, a man who not only put the blues guitar instrumental on the recording map but so refined it that virtually nobody afterwards dared to tackle it.

To meet the demands of the market he recorded a lot of vocal blues (pictured right is his Paramount record 'He's in the Jailhouse Now'), and he was a pleasant enough singer, but one feels that he would have been happier left to play his rag songs like 'Diddie Wah Diddie' or 'Come On Boys, Let's Do That Messin' Around' with only the briefest of vocals, concentrating on producing those cascading, dizzying chord progressions and that faultless finger-picking.

Harmonically, Blind Blake was more knowledgeable than most of the blues guitarists of his day. He displayed a rich melodic imagination even in the most conventional of blues settings, while anchoring his tones to a rock-steady yet supple beat with his dextrous thumb-picking.

His first record, 'West Coast Blues', was a guitar rag with talking – a free-form verbal doodling – part dance instruction, part self-advertisement: 'Now we goin' to the old country rock ...first thing we do, swing your partner...promenade...now people, if you ever heard something that make you feel good, you gonna hear somethin' in a few minutes...'

Blind Blake was a kingpin of the blues scene in the 1920s, a fluent and versatile guitarist whom other artists were avid to have on their sessions. His influence touched many East Coast guitarists and his songs have been revived by Ry Cooder and Leon Redbone. Yet the facts of his life continue to elude blues historians.

Coupled with the delicate and tuneful 'Early Morning Blues', it was one of the hits of 1926 and assured Blake of a future as a recording artist.

Over the next six years he made almost 80 sides of his own 'with that snappy guitar playing,' as a Paramount Records advert claimed, 'like only Blind Blake can do'. He contributed some exceptional accompaniments to singers such as Ma Rainey, Irene Scruggs and Elzadie Robinson. There were memorable duet recordings, too, with the banjoist Gus Cannon and Papa Charlie Jackson, and his four hander with

Charlie Spand, 'Hastings Street', is perhaps the most exciting guitar-piano blues duet ever recorded.

Yet sightings of Blake in action are scarce. The Virginia-born guitarist Bill Williams (1897-1973) claimed that he met him in the 1920s around Bristol, Tennessee, and worked with him for a few months, but that may have been a tease. No doubt Blake played at parties, maybe on the vaudeville theatre circuit too, but his absence from even his contemporaries' reminiscences suggests that he may have died not long after he stopped recording.



EAST COAST BLUES



ABOVE: John Cephas, one of the most prominent modern practitioners of East Coast ragtime guitar, was greatly influenced by Blind Boy Fuller.

OPPOSITE: Buddy Moss also influenced Cephas and Tarheel Slim, among others, while Moss himself had been inspired by the music of Blind Blake.

influence was so wide and enduring that its reverberations will sound repeatedly both in this narrative and in the accompanying CD/cassette.

REGIONAL BIAS

If this is a somewhat ragged discussion of East Coast blues, in a way that's rather appropriate: between the 1920s and the 1940s the area's music was recorded fitfully and haphazardly. Once it had become an industry tenet that blues hits came from Texas (Blind Lemon Jefferson), or Memphis (Jim Jackson), or from northern cities like Indianapolis (Leroy Carr) and Chicago (Tampa Red & Georgia Tom, Big Bill Broonzy), nobody gave much thought to the possibilities of the Southeast.

It's no coincidence that many of the region's most fascinating figures were recorded by Victor: Ralph Peer, the company's talent scout for southern music, was genuinely interested in what he thought of as idiosyncratic artists or unusual material.

It was entirely typical, for example, that he should be drawn to a performer like Luke Jordan. This intriguing singer and guitarist, born probably about 1890, was well known around Lynchburg in south central Virginia. He sang blues – his first recording, 'Church Bells Blues' (1927), was remembered and alluded to or copied by several bluesmen over the next quarter of a century – but he also had a store of turn-of-the-century 'rag

songs', like 'Traveling Coon', 'Cocaine' and 'Pick Poor Robin Clean', which display his unflustered fingerpicking as well as his eerily high voice.

Another Peer discovery was Julius Daniels (1902-47), a rich-voiced singer and guitarist from around Charlotte, North Carolina. Daniels' stock of blues, hymns and rag songs, such as 'Can't Put the Bridle on That Mule This Morning' (a variant of a common-stock song known all over the South), may have seemed to Peer more rewarding, commercially and aesthetically, than a batch of blues all cut from the same pattern. Unfortunately, record-buyers don't appear to have shared his vision.

LOST IN MUSIC

For an excellent example of how the blues craze could distort an artist's potential we have only to consider the career of Blind Blake – a brilliant blues guitarist, it's true, but capable of much more, had he only been given more

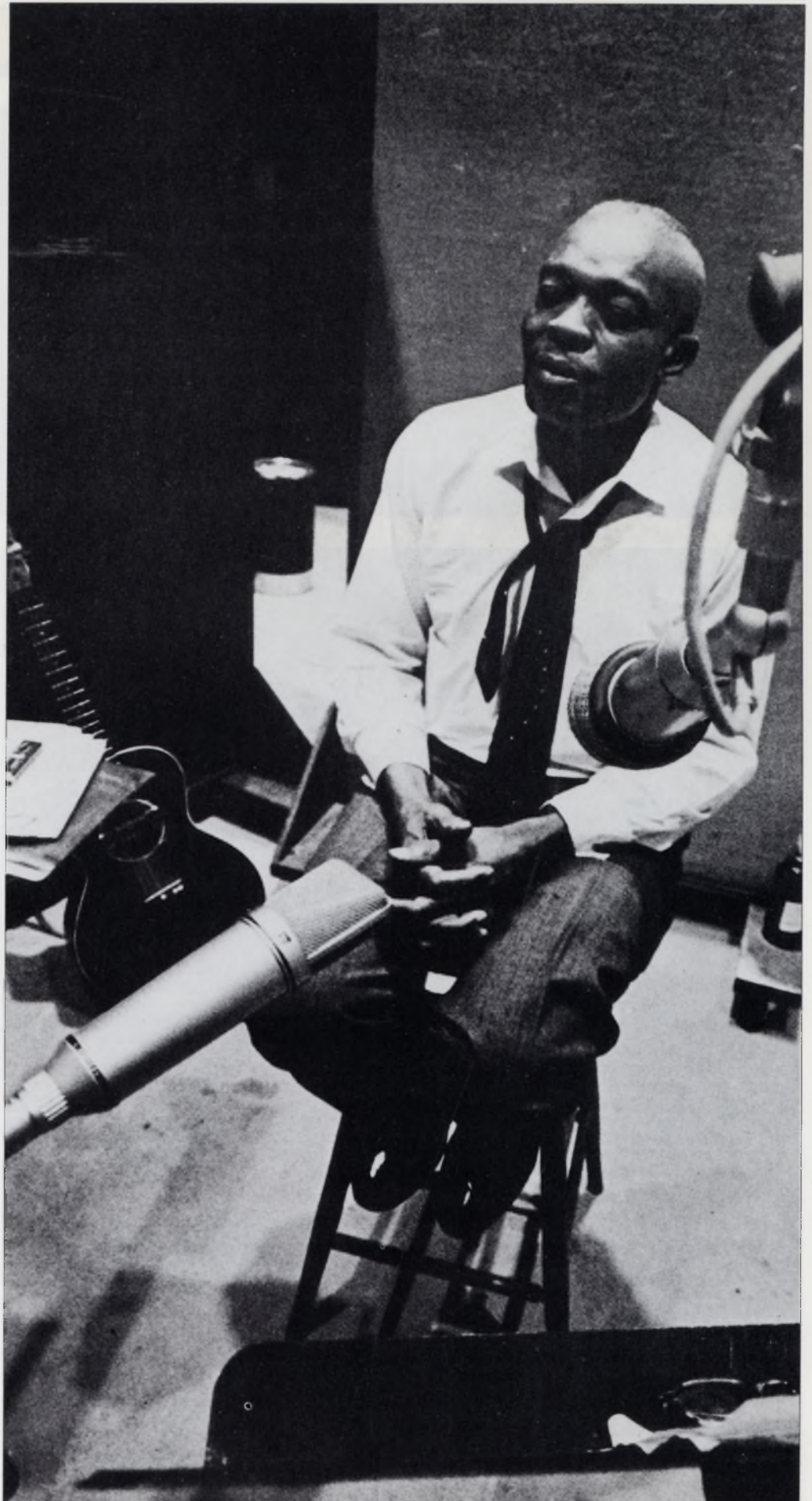
SUNSHINE AND SONG

Blind Blake probably came from Jacksonville, and singer-guitarist Louis Washington, who took the professional title Tallahassee Tight on some 1934 recordings, was presumably from Tallahassee or nearby Quincy, which he mentions in his song 'Quincy Wimmens'. Those two aside, it's hard to find a blues musician with any significant Florida connection if you look at artists' commercial recordings.

Following the trails of folklorists brings you to a different conclusion. In 1935 Alan Lomax described a recent Florida visit as his 'most exciting field-trip' yet. He encountered singer-guitarist Gabriel Brown, whom he described as 'better even than Leadbelly', and, at a transient workers' camp, a superb band of two harmonica-players and a guitarist, led by Booker T. Sapps. Some of these artists' music was preserved for the Library of Congress and has been issued by specialist labels.

Forty years later, folklorists could still find rural musicians whose memories stretched back before the blues. But the most vivid account of early black music in Florida comes from a popular magazine of about 1904:

'One of the familiar sights in Florida is the strange "jug bands" which are formed in nearly every district by negro boys... Close at hand, the sounds which they draw from their large stone jugs, into which they blow or whistle, are as unlike music as could be imagined... people generally get rid of the "musicians" as soon as possible by giving them small coins... The Jug Band, therefore, resolves itself into a kind of musical blackmailing association.'



CHRONOLOGY

1926

Blind Blake makes his first records for Paramount.

1927

Victor's Ralph Peer makes field recordings of North Carolinian Julius Daniels, and Virginia's Luke Jordan.

1930

Howard Armstrong and Carl Martin make their first record, as members of the Tennessee Chocolate Drops. They will record together again in the 1970s, and Armstrong will release a fine CD in 1995, at the age of 86.

1932

Blind Blake makes his last recordings, and disappears from the scene.

1935

Blind Boy Fuller makes his first recordings, and becomes the major influence on the sound of East Coast blues.

1940

Josh White begins to record blues and folksongs with an element of social protest, in contrast to his earlier, straight blues recordings.

1941

Blind Boy Fuller dies. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee become a permanent partnership, moving to New York the following year.

1947

Alec Seward and Louis Hayes (aka Guitar Slim and Jelly Belly) make their first records in New York, but in an old-fashioned, acoustic style.



opportunities to play according to his own tastes rather than that of the market. Or take the guitar and harmonica team of Bobbie Leecan and Robert Cooksey, a hot act in the black sections of New York and Philadelphia in the 1920s. They dutifully met the relentless demand for blues with a stream of elegant 12-bar instrumentals. It was only when they were let loose in a jazz band or skiffle setting that they showed what sparkling and technically

demanding music they could produce.

Some artists escaped the blues noose, like the enchanting guitarist William Moore, a barber with the melodious address of Tappahannock on the river Rappahannock, in the Tidewater area of East Virginia. At a single session in 1928 he recorded a beguiling set of rag songs, such as 'Ragtime Millionaire' and 'Tillie Lee', interspersed with lilt-ing guitar set-pieces, like 'Old Country Rock' and 'Barbershop Rag'. 'Only

barber in the world can shave you and give you music while he's doing it,' comments a bystander.

BELATED RECOGNITION

Virginia could claim to be a lost world of the blues. Moore and Jordan's successors include singer-guitarists Carl Martin (born 1906), Archie Edwards (born 1918), Pernell Charity (1920-79), John Tinsley (born 1920), Carl Hodges (born about 1933) and Turner and Marvin Foddrell (born 1920s), all of whom secured places for their elegant music on LPs in the 1960s and 1970s.

Martin, alone among these, had previously recorded, in the 1930s while living in Chicago. Also recorded in that decade (in the deadly Depression year of 1933) was Lynchburg's Spark Plug Smith, a jolly-looking singer and guitarist with a high, wavering voice not unlike Luke Jordan's, who varied his blues with such left-field material as the pop songs 'My Blue Heaven' and 'A Shanty in Old Shanty Town'.

Alec Seward (1901-72) left his birthplace, the naval port of Newport News, during the mid-1920s to live in New York, a journey that would be repeated

ABOVE LEFT: During the 1920s the father and son team Andrew and Jim Baxter recorded both blues and traditional white tunes.

OPPOSITE: Harp player Phil Wiggins teamed up with John Cephas in the late 1970s. During the next two decades they toured all the continents.

1961	1969	1972	1978	1982	1987	1994	1996
Folklorist Sam Charters records Pink Anderson and Baby Tate in North Carolina. In Philadelphia, Pete Welding records Doug Quattlebaum and Blind Connie Williams.	Bruce Bastin and Peter B. Lowry begin researching in the southeastern states, recording many surviving blues-singers, including guitarist Willie Trice and harmonica player Peg Leg Sam.	Rev Gary Davis, Blind Boy Fuller's guitar teacher, dies in New York; he had been a gospel singer for many years, but his brilliant playing was admired by and influenced blues guitarists worldwide.	Guitarist John Cephas and harmonica player Phil Wiggins make their first recordings together.	Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee break up their team after 40 successful years together. Terry dies in 1986.	Elizabeth Cotten, composer of 'Freight Train', dies aged 95. She was still playing guitar until not long before her death.	Keb' Mo' releases his eponymous first CD; although born in Los Angeles in the 1950s, he has much of the easy ragtime spirit of the East Coast.	Brownie McGhee dies aged 80. He had been retired for 10 years, but he re-emerged to work with Californian blues-singer Elmer Lee Thomas, whose band accompanied Brownie on his last recordings in May 1995.

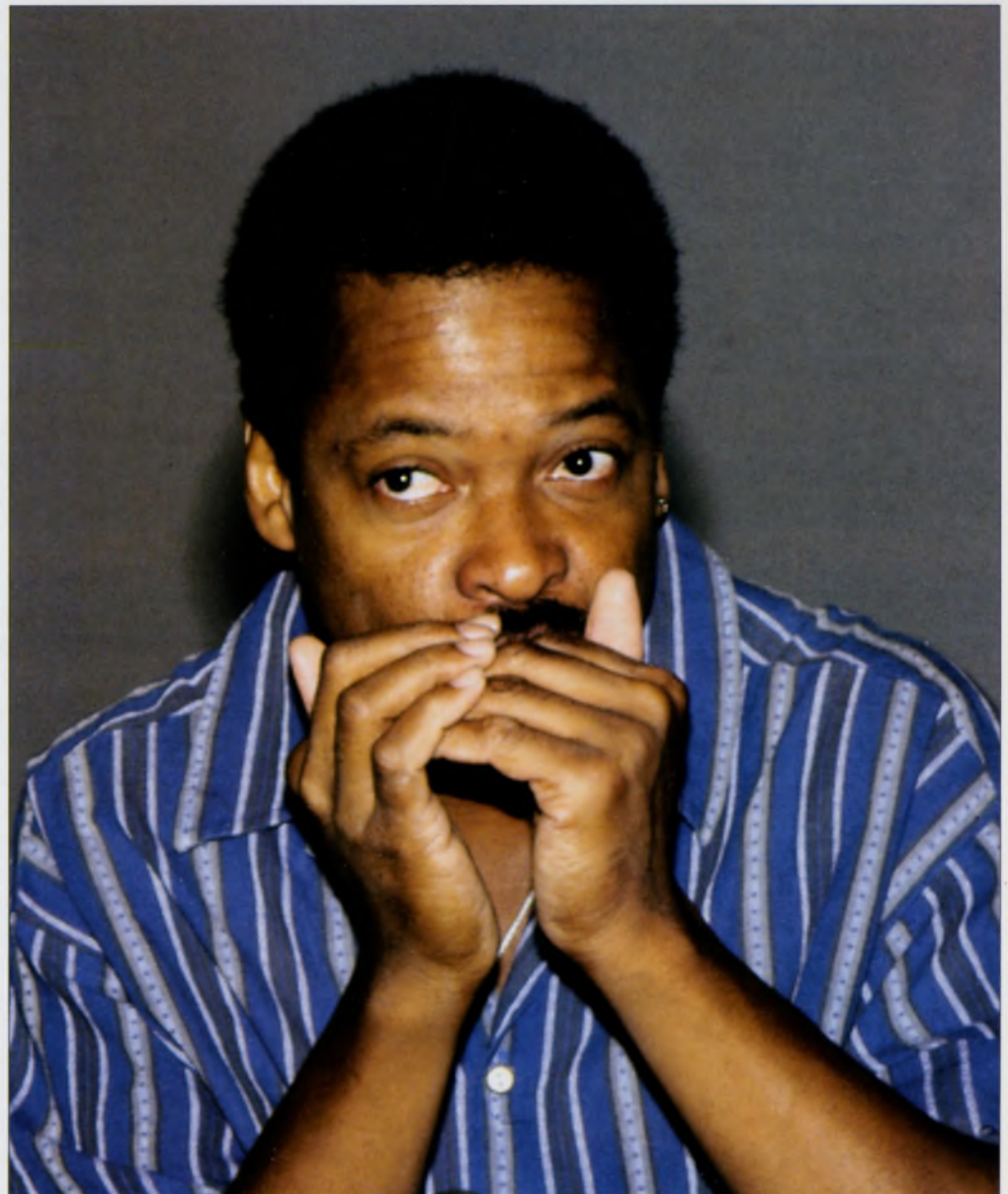
over the next 20 years by countless southeasterners. In the 1940s, partnered by another singing guitarist, Louis Hayes from Asheville, North Carolina, Seward made recordings of placid blues with intricate twin-guitar accompaniments. Impossible to think of as New York music, the recordings sound instead like treasured memories of a rural landscape long left behind; blues remembered hills.

THE MAIN MAN

By the time most of these men were getting started in music the entire Southeast had fallen under the spell of one man, Blind Boy Fuller from Durham, North Carolina. From the mid-1930s to the present day, Fuller looms over the story of the region's blues. For a while everybody played like him, whether they were outright disciples, like Floyd 'Dipper Boy' Council and the Trice brothers, Rich and Willie, or people who simply knew him from his records.

Fuller died in 1941, never having ventured far from his stamping-grounds except briefly to make records. But within a few years seeds from his stock were being scattered in the northern cities of New York, Newark and Baltimore by migrants like singer-guitarists Boy Green and Sunny Jones.

And of course by Brownie McGhee, an ex-pupil of Fuller who had become a New York resident by the early 1940s and was busy building a career in the



EAST COAST BLUES



ABOVE: 'Colonel' Bill Williams claimed that while working as part of a road gang in the early 1920s, he was sought out by fellow guitar-picker Blind Blake and that they became a popular duo playing for Williams' fellow workers. One of Williams' most intriguing pieces was a ragtime interpretation of 'The Star-Spangled Banner'.

clubs and studios with his partner Sonny Terry. McGhee can hardly be called an East Coaster: he grew up around the East Tennessee cities Knoxville and Kingsport, but his incessant travelling made him familiar with all the music one might hear in Appalachia and on the eastern seaboard.

A UNIFYING LANGUAGE

The McGhee-Terry sound, with its smooth interlocking of guitar and harmonica, would grow over the years into a kind of Basic English of the blues, spoken everywhere from New York to Newcastle. We can hear a version of it as early as the early 1940s in the few obscure but captivating recordings by Skoodle Dum Doo & Sheffield, the former a 12-string-guitar playing bluesman from way back – he

had first recorded in 1928 – named Seth Richard or Richards.

Fifty years on, the combination is refreshed and recast in the partnership of singer-guitarist John Cephas and harp-player Phil Wiggins. Cephas, born in Washington DC in 1930, was raised in Bowling Green, Virginia, and learned some of his trade from the pianist Wilbert 'Big Chief' Ellis, who had worked with McGhee in the 1940s.

Beginning their collaboration in 1978, Cephas and Wiggins gradually moved from straightforward McGhee-Terry stylings to a subtler approach, informed by deep knowledge of the entire blues legacy. A 1995 album, *Cool Down* (Alligator), finds Cephas engaged in experiments like playing Skip James' 'Special Rider' in duet with Senegalese kora player Djimo Kouyate.

It seems somehow appropriate to bring Keb' Mo' in here. Kevin Moore, as he started out, was born in Los Angeles in the early 1950s. Both his parents were from the southwest and his early musical experiences included playing guitar with the violinist Papa John Creach and portraying Robert Johnson in a movie docudrama.

Not a whiff of East Coast air so far – but in his remarkable mid-1990s transformation into a postmodern acoustic bluesman Keb' Mo' has acquired an airy ease that surely owes something to models like Fuller and McGhee, especially when he plays a vintage National steel guitar just like Fuller's. And here and there in his albums *Keb' Mo'* and *Just Like You* he also evinces a delicate ragtime sensibility that would have been familiar to Luke Jordan or William Moore.

KING GUITAR

It will be apparent by now that the guitar lorded it over other instruments even more in the southeast than elsewhere. Or so it seems from the recorded evidence but, as always, this is a historical hot potato: were guitars really ubiquitous, or did recording scouts simply shake their heads at the fiddlers, banjoists and piano players who turned up for auditions?

A few pianists did make it through the net, like the Savannah, Georgia, player Sugar Underwood, or Curtis Henry and 'Peg-Leg' Ben Abney, who recorded in Charlotte in the 1930s (but may not have been locals). But there appears to have been no pianists' circuit, as in the Texas logging camps, to sustain a tradition of barrelhouse blues. The piano-players who ruled the New York blues scene of the 1940s and 1950s were from elsewhere: Big Chief Ellis from Alabama, Jack Dupree from New Orleans.

What emerges from the research of the writer Bruce Bastin is a detailed map of untapped talent: fiddlers and banjo players whose music, even in the 1920s, seemed to the record companies to be too archaic to become

Further Listening

An album of Blind Blake should be a cornerstone of any blues collection, and Yazoo's *Ragtime Guitar's Foremost Fingerpicker* makes an ideal choice. *The Master of Ragtime Guitar* (Indigo JGOCD 2046) and *The Best of Blind Blake* (Wolf WBJ-017-CD) are good value too, but are fraught with duplications, both of each other and of the Yazoo.

Among the highlights of *East Coast Blues 1926-1935* (Yazoo) are the lilting guitar duets of South Carolina's Willie Walker and the ragtime improvisations of Virginia's William Moore. The album's title makes a baggy definition, since Bo Weavil Jackson hailed from Alabama and Tarter & Gay respectively from the highlands of East Tennessee and southwestern Virginia, where Carl Martin came from too, but it's still an attractive collection. So is *Mama Let Me Lay It on You* (Yazoo 1040), an East Coast anthology in all but name, with selections by Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, Josh White and the Virginia oddball Spark Plug Smith (whose bizarre oeuvre can be found in full on Document DOCD-5387). The songs by Irene Scruggs and Leola B. Wilson have brilliant Blake accompaniments.

The best thing about *Ragtime Blues Guitar* (Document) is its gathering of all the remarkable rag

songs and guitar pieces of William Moore. It also has six sides by an effervescent harmonica-and-guitar duo, Chicken Wilson & Skeeter Hinton, who come over like a more rowdy and downhome Leecan & Cooksey (whose own complete work is assembled on two Document volumes, DOCD-5279 and DOCD-5280.)

Carolina Blues Guitar (Old Tramp) is a deceptive title for an album that includes the very odd (and conceivably white) Cedar Creek Sheik, who specialised in suggestive songs with raggy guitar, like a kind of Carolinian Bo Carter. Roosevelt Antrim and Sonny Jones are singer-guitarists broadly in the Fuller mould, but Virgil Childers reveals a mixed repertoire of blues, minstrel songs and more modern pop songs.

The population shift northwards in the 1940s moved eastern blues artists, along with everyone else, to cities like New York, Newark and Baltimore, where tiny independent labels erratically recorded their music – a period that is excellently documented by *Play My Juke-Box* (Flyright). Among many rare and piquant recordings from the 1940s and 1950s, the lovely, restful guitar duets of Guitar Slim & Jelly Belly (Alec Seward & Louis Hayes) demand to be heard.

BLIND BLAKE RAGTIME GUITAR'S FOREMOST FINGERPICKER (YAZOO 1068)

Diddie Wa Diddie/Come on Boys
Let's Do That Messin' Around/
Southern Rag/Police Dog Blues/
C.C. Pill Blues/Hard Pushing
Papa/Rope Stretching Blues/
Skeedle Loo Doo Blues/Chump
Man Blues/Hastings Street/
Georgia Bound/Righteous Blues/
Too Tight Blues No. 2/
Blind Arthur's Breakdown/
One Time Blues/Playing Policy
Blues/You Gonna Quit Me Blues/
Bad Feeling Blues/Hey Hey
Daddy Blues/Black Dog Blues/
Seaboard Stomp/Sweet Papa
Low Down/Sweet Jivin' Mama.

EAST COAST BLUES 1926- 1935 (YAZOO 1013)

South Carolina Rag/Dupree Blues
(Willie Walker)/Brownie Blues/
Unknown Blues (Tarter & Gay)/
Black Dog Blues/Original Blues
(Bayless Rose)/Crow Jane/

Old Time Blues (Carl Martin)/
Blind Arthur's Breakdown (Blind
Blake)/Barbershop Rag/
Raggin' the Blues (William
Moore)/Pistol Blues (Bo Weavil
Jackson)/Myrtle Avenue Stomp/
D.C. Rag (Chicken Wilson &
Skeeter Hinton)

RAGTIME BLUES GUITAR (1927-1930) (DOCUMENT DOCD-5062)

Dry Bone Shuffle (unissued take)
(Blind Blake)/One Way Gal/
Ragtime Crazy/Midnight Blues/
Ragtime Millionaire/Tillie Lee/
Barbershop Rag/Old Country
Rock/Raggin' the Blues (William
[Bill] Moore)/Brownie Blues/
Unknown Blues (Tarter & Gay)/
Myrtle Avenue Stomp/D.C. Rag/
Chicken Wilson Blues/
House Snake Blues/Frog Eye
Stomp/Station House Rag
(Chicken Wilson & Skeeter
Hinton)/Jamestown Exhibition/
Black Dog Blues/Original Blues/
Frisco Blues (Bayless Rose)/

Dupree Blues/South Carolina Rag
(takes 1 & 2) (Willie Walker)

CAROLINA BLUES GUITAR 1936-1939 (OLD TRAMP OTCD-03)

Ford V-8/Watch the Fords Go By/
Mary Had a Little Lamb/
She's Totin' Something Good/
What a Pity/I Believe Somebody's
Been Ridin' My Mule/Don't Use
That Stuff/Buy It from the Poultry
Man/Don't Credit My Stuff/Jimmy
Shut His Store Doors (Cedar
Creek Sheik)/No Use of Worryin'/
Complaint to Make/
I Guess You're Satisfied/
Station Boy Blues (Roosevelt
Antrim)/Dago Blues/
Red River Blues/Who's That
Knockin' at My Door/Somebody
Stole My Jane/Travelin' Man/
Preacher and the Bear (Virgil
Childers)/Won't Somebody
Pacify My Mind/
I'm Pretty Good at It/Love Me
with a Feeling/Dough Roller
(Sonny Jones)

PLAY MY JUKE-BOX: EAST COAST BLUES 1943-1954 (FLYRIGHT PLY CD 45)

Play My Juke Box/A&B Blues (Boy
Green)/Some Rainy Day (Curley
Weaver)/I Got What My Daddy
Likes (Marylin Scott)/
West Kinney Street Blues/
Tampa Blues/Broom Street Blues/
Gas Ration Blues (Skoodle Dum
Doo & Sheffield)/Harlem
Women/Awful Shame (Hank
Kilroy)/I Love That Woman
(Guitar Shorty)/Dices Dices (Big
Chief Ellis)/One o'Clock Boogie
(Julius King)/ Hello Central,
Please Give Me 209/Good
Looking Woman Blues (Robert
Lee Westmoreland)/Humming
Bird Blues/I've Been Dreaming
(Guitar Slim & Jelly Belly)/
Leaving Home Blues/
Don't Want No Pretty Woman
(Sunny Jones)/Better Get Ready
(Bider R. Wilson & Family)/
The Jinx Is on Me (Gabriel
Brown)/Too Much Competition
(Tarheel Slim)

EAST COAST BLUES



ABOVE: North Carolina bluesman Tarheel Slim (right) with record producer Pete Lowry. Slim moved to New York in the early 1950s and proved capable of blending his traditional musical background with the demands of R&B.

commercial. In North Georgia, fiddlers Eddie Anthony, who worked with Peg Leg Howell, and Andrew Baxter, who duetted with his guitarist son Jim, did make a few records of jagged blues and hoedown fiddle-tunes. We know that the Piedmont landscape was dotted with small groups, including mandolins and banjos, but few traces of this stringband activity can be found in the record archives.

Maybe it all seemed too similar to the music of the hillbilly stringbands. In some cases it clearly was much the same kind of music. A black group from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who were unable to resist the temptation to call themselves the Chapel Hillbillies,

played chiefly for white university students. Guitarist Jamie Alston was a member of an otherwise white stringband, also round Chapel Hill. Orange County, in which Chapel Hill lies, had a smaller black population than many North Carolina counties, and, as elsewhere in the south, this encouraged musical interaction between the races – or, to put it another way, helped to relieve the pressure on black musicians to play only for their own community, and play only blues.

Decades later, all this is virtually unrecoverable history, or exists only in the fading memories and autumnal performances of a handful of old musicians. But the southeast has been

doubly unlucky. Not only have the rag songs and banjo tunes gone the way of the Charleston and the T-Model Ford, fading into history as they have done everywhere, but even the region's blues tradition has failed to transform itself into a viable urban idiom.

STUNTED GROWTH

The East Coast touch and easy swing have never been successfully translated on to electric guitars, nor reshaped to create a modern band music on the Chicago or California model. From Robert Johnson to Elmore James to George Thorogood; from T-Bone Walker to Gatemouth Brown to Stevie Ray Vaughan – these are genuine lines of development. The East Coast trail, winding from Blind Boy Fuller to Brownie McGhee to John Cephas, has yet to find a junction where it can turn into a modern musical superhighway.

BluesNotes

EAST COAST BLUES

A Listener's Guide to:

EAST COAST BLUES

■ This unique compilation, specially produced for *The Blues Collection*, spans 20 years of black music in the eastern seaboard states, from rural songsters of the 1920s to northern, city-dwelling blues specialists of the 1940s.

■ Several of these recordings are from a time and place in which the blues craze had yet to blot out older musics such as ragtime and common-stock dance tunes.



1 **Bobbie Leecan's Need-More Band: WASH-BOARD CUT OUT (Bobbie Leecan) 2'57"**

Guitarist Bobbie Leecan and harmonica player Robert Cooksey were among the most technically accomplished black musicians of their day. On numerous recordings in 1926-27, some as a duo, others with skiffle-type line-ups like this, they created wonderfully infectious dance music. In 1926 Leecan and Cooksey were working in Harlem, but some of their tunes allude to Philadelphia. 'Wash-board Cut Out' was cut in Camden, New Jersey, on 5 April 1927.

2 **Julius Daniels: NINETY-NINE YEAR BLUES (Composer not known) 3'14"**

A few weeks before the recording of 'Wash-board Cut Out', Victor Records

sent their first mobile recording team into the South, headed by their A&R man Ralph S. Peer. At a brief stop in Atlanta, Georgia, they recorded some gospel musicians and, on 19 February, the magnificent songster Julius Daniels.

Despite its title, this is not a blues but a rag song with a jail motif, elements of which turn up all over the southern musical landscape. The blues historian Bruce Bastin hears 'distinct banjo undertones in the guitar playing'.

3 **Blind Blake: SOUTHERN RAG (Blind Blake) 2'54"**

One of the finest examples of Blind Blake's ragtime guitar picking, this recording, which was made in Chicago about October 1927, also lets us hear a fine example of Blake word-painting a scene of black rural life in the southeast.

4 **Luke Jordan: IF I CALL YOU MAMA (Luke Jordan) 3'16"**

'If I Call You Mama', made at Luke Jordan's last session in New York, on 19 November 1929, exhibits his delicate high-pitched singing and relaxed guitar playing in a blues full of arresting images, including early appearances of favourite one-liners like 'I asked for whiskey/water, she gave me gasoline'. The original 78 of this song, coupled with 'Tom Brown Sits in His Prison Cell' (track 10), is exceedingly rare and this first-ever reissue is from the only known copy.

5 **Jack Gowdlock: POOR JANE BLUES (Jack Gowdlock) 3'00"**

Gowdlock was a blues-singer and guitarist from the small town of Cross Keys, South Carolina, between Union

and Laurens. He played with the blind gospel singer Gussie Nesbitt, born in 1910, and was probably of a similar age. The two men were scouted by a local store-owner for a Victor session in Charlotte, North Carolina, on 29 May 1931 and recorded four numbers – two sacred duets which were never issued and two solo blues by Gowdlock which were – but the record sold so poorly that 65 years later not even the most assiduous collectors had ever seen or heard it. Fortunately a copy has survived and Gowdlock's blues (this and track 8) can be heard at last.

'Poor Jane Blues' is a version of the hugely widespread eight-bar blues usually known as 'Crow Jane', sometimes as 'Red River Blues', in other regions as 'Sliding Delta'. Gowdlock alludes to the first two titles in his opening and closing verses. Julius Daniels recorded a version of the theme in 1927 and the Virginia singer Carl Martin did it in 1935. More

EAST COAST BLUES

recently it has been recorded by Skip James and Mississippi John Hurt.

6 Peg Leg Howell & Eddie Anthony: TURKEY BUZZARD BLUES (Composer not known) 3'05"

Amongst the several blues recorded by Georgia's Peg Leg Howell, with his fiddle-playing sidekick Eddie Anthony, can be found this lively example of the common-stock fiddle-tune 'Turkey in the Straw', recorded in Atlanta on 30 October 1928. The distance between this performance and the same tune played by white Georgian musicians, like fiddler Gid Tanner and guitarist Riley Puckett, is next to nothing at all.

7 Luke Jordan: PICK POOR ROBIN CLEAN (Composer not known) 3'16"

The implications of this strange rag song, which Jordan recorded at his first session, in Charlotte on 16 August 1927, are revealed by the black writer Ralph Ellison, who had heard it sung in Kansas City. It was 'inevitably productive of laughter – even when we ourselves were its object. Each of us recognised that [the poor robin's] fate was somehow our own. Our defeats and failures... were loaded upon his back and given ironic significance and thus made more bearable.'

The use of what would nowadays be regarded as racially demeaning terms locates the composition in the 'coon song' era: the 1890s and early 1900s.

8 Jack Gowdlock: ROLLIN' DOUGH BLUES (Jack Gowdlock) 2'55"

This strange, harmonically primitive blues, with its meagre chordal movement, recalls the approach of such idiosyncratic players as Louisiana's Robert Pete Williams or Alabama's Ed Bell. The sexual imagery, already a blues commonplace, would also be deployed by southeastern bluesmen Buddy Moss ('Dough Rolling Papa') and Sonny Jones ('Dough Roller').

9 Julius Daniels: SLIPPIN' AND SLIDIN' UP THE GOLDEN STREET (Composer not known) 3'21"

On some of the numbers he recorded at his first session (see track 2)

Julius Daniels was assisted by guitarist Bubba Lee Torrence, probably from Charlotte. This is one of them, a serenely-paced gospel song.

Daniels occasionally employs the device, so often used by Blind Willie Johnson, of letting the slide guitar 'sing' some of the text.

10 Luke Jordan: TOM BROWN SITS IN HIS PRISON CELL (Luke Jordan) 2'58"

As with 'Pick Poor Robin Clean' (track 7), both storyline and language evoke the now rather unapproachable world of the 'coon song' and the burnt cork minstrel, albeit updated by the reference to telegrams. Much the same air of greasepaint and gaslight hangs about certain other recordings of this era by black singers, such as Alec Johnson's 'Mysterious Coon' or Blind Blake's 'He's in the Jailhouse Now' – and by white artists too, like Charlie Poole in 'Coon from Tennessee'. 'Tom Brown' is from the same session as track 4.

11 Blind Blake: DEPRESSION'S GONE FROM ME BLUES (Composer not known) 3'37"

The sombre blues guitar melody not only belies the optimistic title but is quite uncharacteristic of Blind Blake's playing – enough for some experts to doubt whether it is Blake. The other side of the original release adds to the controversy, being an equally untypical performance of an old music-hall song, 'Champagne Charlie is My Name'.

In fact there can be little doubt that we are hearing Blake, though he seems slightly ill at ease with the song, a variant of 'Sitting on Top of the World'. Curious, too, that one of the greatest guitarists of his day should end his recording career – this was his last disc, cut around June 1932 – on, literally, a sour note.

12 Blind Boy Fuller: WALKING AND LOOKING BLUES (Blind Boy Fuller) 3'09"

The era of blues domination which overtook Blind Blake in the early 1930s would throw up no more important figure in the southeast than Blind Boy Fuller, heard here in a particularly fine slow blues from a session on 12 July 1937.

13 Boy Green: PLAY MY JUKE BOX (Boy Green) 2'59"

Many of the remaining tracks in this collection testify to Blind Boy Fuller's enormous influence. In this dramatic example, both the sound of the steel-bodied guitar and the sly suggestiveness of the lyrics faithfully replicate the master's touch.

Boy Green made his only recording – this song coupled with 'A and B Blues' (track 18) – for a small New Jersey record label in 1944.

14 Brownie McGhee & Sonny Terry: CAROLINA BLUES (Walter B. McGhee) 3'09"

Fuller's closest imitation for a few years after his death was Brownie McGhee, whose easy-going, urbane manner would take him into worlds Fuller could never have entered. Here he and his partner in that adventure, harmonica-player Sonny Terry (both pictured on previous page), demonstrate their almost telepathic empathy in a recording from 12 December 1944.

15 Gabriel Brown and His Guitar: DOWN IN THE BOTTOM (Gabriel Brown) 2'59"

Hard to believe that Gabriel Brown, a musician with all the elegance of an old badger, could have rivalled the suave Brownie McGhee, but Brownie himself recalled a time when he and Gabriel divided New York's blues-club work between them. That was presumably in the mid-1940s, when Brown was popular enough to make a lot of records for the entrepreneur Joe Davis. This one from 26 August 1943 is typical, with its loose structure and acrid guitar toning.

16 Skoodle Dum Doo & Sheffield: GAS RATION BLUES (Seth Richards) 2'45"

In a pretty variation of the McGhee-Terry guitar-harmonica effect, Skoodle Dum Doo & Sheffield offer what may be the only blues about wartime gasoline shortages. This is another of those scarce items, a recording made in 1943: the American Federation of Musicians' dispute with the record companies kept all union musicians out of the studios during that year.

17 Marylin Scott and Her Guitar: I GOT WHAT MY DADDY LIKES (Composer not known) 2'42"

We seem to be eavesdropping on a party or an off-duty moment at a recording session, as Marylin Scott picks and sings a saucy blues to appreciative guffaws. Yet this was a commercial release, albeit a terribly obscure one. Scott also sang with the Johnny Otis orchestra and other small groups in a jump-blues idiom, while maintaining a career on the other side of the spiritual tracks as a gospel singer under the name Mary DeLoach or Deloatch. On one record she is billed as 'The Carolina Blues Girl'.

'I Got What My Daddy Likes' is based on Lucille Bogan's 1935 disc 'That's What My Baby Likes', which in turn took some of its striking sexual metaphors from a novelty blues of the 1920s, 'My Handy Man'.

18 Boy Green: A AND B BLUES (Boy Green) 3'00"

The point of the title may be elusive, but Green's picking on what may be a National Steel guitar is clean and deft. Strange that he should have made so little impact on fellow musicians that nobody seems to recall him.

19 Sunny Jones: DON'T WANT PRETTY WOMEN (Composer not known) 3'12"

Robert 'Sunny' Jones was born in Georgia but around 1930 moved to North Carolina, where he performed at dances and fish fries with Blind Boy Fuller and Sonny Terry. In 'Leaving Home Blues', the flipside of 'Don't Want Pretty Women', he speaks of 'goin' back to Wilson, N.C.' He accompanied Fuller and Terry to a Memphis recording session in 1939 and cut a couple of discs, then reappeared some years later on an obscure label from Baltimore. He plays in the basic style of the Fuller circle on this paean to ugliness.

20 Skoodle Dum Doo & Sheffield: TAMPA BLUES (Seth Richards) 3'07"

According to Bruce Bastin, this lively and unusual song (from the same session as track 16) was familiar to blues musicians in a few counties in South central Virginia in the 1930s.

THE STORY OF THE BLUES

84: The Young Generation Comes of Age

In the 1980s a new crop of Chicago blues artists grew up, nourished by the old traditions but ready to seek fresh inspiration. A decade later, they had, mostly, fulfilled their promise.

Having previewed the 1980s, so to speak, with their six albums of *Living Chicago Blues*, the musical watchdogs at Alligator Records took a few years' nap and woke up in 1987 with the same idea. Well, not quite. This time there would be just one album and, unlike the earlier project, it would leave no space for veteran keepers of the flame. *The New Bluebloods* was designed to introduce, in the words of its subtitle, 'The Next Generation of Chicago Blues'.

So bold an assertion amounts to a bet. Less than ten years on it seems fair to ask how many of the *Bluebloods* runners paid off.

And the answer is most of them. One who didn't, but takes no blame for it, was Valerie Wellington, an extremely promising singer in the mould of Koko Taylor, who had already excited blueswatchers with her 1984 album *Million Dollar Secret* (Rooster Blues) but who died, tragically young, a few years later. Not much has been heard lately of John Watkins, then 33 and working with his uncle Jimmy Johnson. But as for the others...

Family members

The big success story belongs to the Kinsey Report. They had started out as the backing group for Big Daddy Kinsey, a Muddy Waters devotee and father of three members of the band, but guitarist Donald Kinsey took a wide detour from Chicago blues during the 1970s, forming a rock band then going over to reggae and working with Peter Tosh and Bob Marley. He returned home in 1984 and rejoined the family group, which went on to play in Europe and make powerful albums for Pointblank.

Melvin Taylor, like Jimmy Johnson and Jimmy Dawkins before him, found fame

easier to acquire in Europe, where he had made a couple of albums even before *Bluebloods*. Like Dawkins, he too is an all-over-the-guitar player, whose expertise is touched with the spirit of Jimi Hendrix – an important model for many blues guitarists of his generation.

Singer, guitarist and tenor sax player Maurice John Vaughn had caught blueslovers' attention in the mid-1980s with the witty move of releasing an album in a plain white cover under the title *Generic Blues*. On the evidence of his 1993 set *In the Shadow of the City* (Alligator), Vaughn is a developing talent worth watching, not least for his pungent songwriting.

Imperial style

Alligator also nurtured Lil' Ed Williams, a musician of another stripe altogether. Nephew of bluesman J.B. Hutto, he absorbed every last raw drop of that energetic singer and slide-guitar player's musical spirit. From the mid-1970s onwards, with his band the Blues Imperials, Lil' Ed filled the role of Chicago Chainsaw Blues Massacre Man previously played by his uncle and before him by Hound Dog Taylor. Booked to record a single track for *Bluebloods*, the band piled into the studio and emerged little more than three hours later with enough stuff to fill an album, which Alligator duly produced – *Roughhousing*'.

The Sons of Blues were the only band in the *Bluebloods* cast to have been featured on *Living Chicago Blues*. The 1987 line-up was somewhat different, since the group had merged with bassist J. W. Williams' Chi-Town Hustlers (retaining both names), but still boasted the best of the younger harmonica players, Billy Branch, then 35. A decade later he remained a top-rated player,



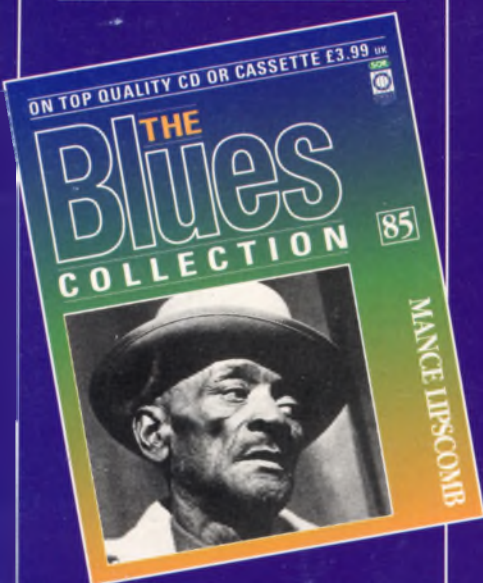
ABOVE: The Kinsey Report, one of several bands who, during the 1980s and 1990s, worked hard to keep the Chicago blues young at heart.

much in demand for harp cameos on other people's records.

The *Bluebloods* liner notes made no fuss about it, but guitarist Dion Payton's 43rd Street Blues Band offered a sight rare in Chicago blues groups, a white female guitarist. Since then Joanna Connor has become known as a blues-rock guitar heavy with a big following in Europe, where she has recorded for the German labels Rui and Inak.

All sorts of old barriers were breaking down. Several Chicago bands had members from Canada, Europe or Japan. The flow of musicians from soul to blues and blues to soul was brisker than ever and, as Alligator's Bruce Iglauer pointed out in the *Bluebloods* notes, 'the influence of both rock and black radio can be heard in new rhythms, new instruments (synthesisers are common on the scene now, and many a guitarist has his array of effects pedals), and an increased emphasis on instrumental technique and flash. But the raw soul of Chicago,' he concluded, 'is still there in the city's music.'

COMING IN ISSUE 85



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