1. **Old Rounder Blues**
2. **Long Steel Rail**
3. **Last Go Round**
4. **Careless Love**
5. **Titanic Blues**
6. **Freight Train Runs So Slow**
7. **Trouble In Mind ***
8. **Blues In The Morning**
9. **You Ain't No Woman**
10. **Freight Train Blues**
11. **Moaning Guitar Blues**
12. **Going Back South**
13. **Blood Red River**
14. **Don't You Put Your Hands On Me**
15. **Jailhouse Blues ***
16. **Key To The Highway ***
17. **Master & John - story ***
18. **Monkey, Baboon & Ape - story ***

* Previously unissued
All other tracks previously issued on Testament 2201

Bill Jackson/ vocal & 12 string guitar.
Recorded in Philadelphia, PA, January 1 & 3, 1962

One of the most gratifying and significant aspects of the blues revival of the past several years—part of the general resurgence of interest in America's folk music heritage—has been the discovery and consequent recording of a number of gifted blues artists who previously had been unheralded or little known outside their immediate environs. Cat Iron, Mance Lipscomb, Memphis Willie Borum, Robert Pete Williams, Fred McDowell, and K. C. Douglas are but a few of the names that spring readily to mind.

All are men who, despite their widely disparate backgrounds, ages, and geographic origins, have in common a commitment to the deepest, most expressive human resources of the blues. All are perpetuators of a musical tradition that at its most potent is one of the most vital and enriching folk expressions evolved in this country, yet one that is in grave danger of disappearing from the American scene due to increasing acculturation, the inroads of mass media and the seeping of popular culture into every nook and cranny of our land, and the gradual eradication of the social circumstances which gave rise to and nourished the blues.

Of this debilitating process critic Robert Shelton has written: "With the inroads of mass communication and the shift in cultural values of rural Negroes, there is evidence to indicate that the old country blues tradition has been ebbing." He continues on an optimistic note: "The very fact of a revival of interest in folk art and folk music in a period of this country's greatest prosperity bids as much for the continuance of a country blues tradition as for the continuance of the Spanish *cante hondo,* the Roumanian *doina* and the Portuguese *fado*. The blues will die when personal unhappiness dies. Folk art has nothing if it has no durability."

Durability or no, it has been apparent for some time that the more archaic blues traditions and practices *have* been dying from neglect, for perpetuation sorely needs usage—and the older singing and playing styles have had increasingly fewer outlets and opportunities to be heard in the last two decades, at the folk level, that is. One asks just where the "continuance of a country blues tradition" is to come from if not from the folk itself, and the younger Negro generation, it must be admitted, has virtually turned its back on this tradition in favor of the sleek, cheap banalities currently served up by popular culture.

In the face of the sad but unavoidable fact of the growing decline of the older blues forms and practices, their preservation and documentation—while this may yet be done—becomes doubly imperative.

All of which is an extended apologia for this recording, which presents the music making of Bill Jackson, a thin, gentle, dignified man of 57 years in whose wistful, ingenuous singing and nimble fingers are carried the Negro folksong traditions of his native Maryland.

This disc is a debut recording in two senses, for not only does it represent Jackson's initial recording, but it further offers the first extended sampling of the vigorous Negro folk music of the state of Maryland, a musical tradition that prior to this album had not been represented on long-play disc, and one that is virtually ignored in the one book dealing with the folklore of the state, A. W. Whitney and C. C. Bullock's 1925 statewide survey *Folk-Lore From Maryland* (published by the American Folk-Lore Society).

Yet, on the basis of this long-play collection alone (and other, more varied samplings from this fecund area will follow on the Testament label), it may be readily seen that the Negro folk music of Maryland is particularly rich and hardy.

Further, it becomes evident that this folk song tradition is an extraordinarily musical one, in that as much emphasis (if not more) is placed upon good, solid musicianship—as exemplified in Jackson's intricate, stunningly detailed and percussive guitar accompaniments and in the rich melodic contours of the selections he performs herein—as on the qualities of total emotional commitment, dramatic intensity, deep pathos, and driving fervor that most usually inform Negro folksong.

This recording, in fact, lends added support to the belief voiced by many folklorists and blues authorities that there exists a distinct "East Coast" blues style—one that is characterized by a carefully controlled emotionality; a deliberate, more sedate handling of vocal and instrumental techniques; a very conscious awareness of and adherance to formal elements; and an extremely high caliber of musicianship, especially as regards the complexity of instrumental accompaniment.

This particular approach to the blues—undoubtedly reflecting considerable influence from white folk music disciplines, with their more acute emphasis on formal and technical considerations—may lack the stinging emotive power and urgency of more elemental Negro folksong stylings (as, for example, the acid, rawly impassioned Mississippi Delta blues and religious song approaches), but it does possess an undeniable charm and power of its own. The force and emotion are there, to be sure—but they are kept carefully in check, subordinated to elements considered of greater importance in the region—musicianship, subtlety, understatement, grace, and a dancing melodic

line.

They are elements very much in evidence in the work of Bill Jackson, to my admittedly biased way of thinking one of the most brilliantly gifted blues guitar stylists to emerge in some time (for a sample of his instrumental art at its most effective, listen to his wonderful handling of *Careless Love*); a capable singer; and the writer of a number of memorable, finely wrought blues.

Bill Jackson was born in Granite, Maryland, on February 22, 1906, one of five children, and the only one of his family to take an interest in music. Bill was fifteen years old when the playing of an older neighbor, Jim Fuller, one of the region's finest guitarists, inspired in him a desire to take up the instrument. After six months of rudimentary instruction from Fuller, Jackson struck out on his own and began playing at the house parties, community work parties, back country suppers and dances that comprised the region's social life. Small three- or four-piece string groups made up of guitar, banjo, mandolin and violin would play reels, jigs, and breakdowns for the dancers at these affairs.

In these surroundings, Jackson mastered the musical style of the area. Chief among his accomplishments was his prowess on the guitar, a definite style for which had evolved and gained favor in the region. This approach was noted for its richness and complexity; it was a heavily syncopated one, with melodic figures in the treble set against recurring bass patterns, both clearly defined and often involving a simultaneous chordal strumming. Two- and three-finger picking was not uncommon, perhaps reflecting a direct influence from the banjo stylings that are still to be heard in the region; many guitarists, for example, are likewise adept at the banjo.

Jackson's music, direct and immediately appealing, requires little in the way of explanation or analysis. Stylistically his music—and that of the region he represents—appears to draw equally on Negro and white country music idioms. There is in Jackson's singing and playing as much from Anglo-American sources—as in the emphasis on formal design, melodic clarity, and the restrained stateliness of delivery—as there is from the Negro tradition, especially that of ragtime, which exerts a strong influence on his approach. The approach is not at all unlike that of the various popular female "classic" blues singers of the 1920s, especially Sara Martin, whose recordings gained wide favor in the region once they were issued (probably because they reflected the prevailing stylistic preference of the area). Harry Oster has noted a resemblance to the

work of Henry "Ragtime" Thomas in Jackson's approach.

After several years on the work gangs of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad—during which time he extended his love of music and his repertoire and skills—Jackson moved to Philadelphia, Pa., where he has remained with his wife and daughter ever since, making periodic trips to his family and friends in the Granite-Ellicott City-Catonsville section of Maryland. In this manner has he been able to maintain his allegiance to the pure musical style of the area.

In 1928, shortly after making the move to Philadelphia, Jackson had the opportunity of recording for RCA Victor. A man who had heard Bill performing at a party was so impressed with his singing and playing that he arranged an audition at Victor's Camden, N. J. studios. Officials at the record firm were likewise enthusiastic over Jackson's songs—*Long Steel Rail* and *Old Rounder Blues*—but the erstwhile manager demanded an exorbitant advance on the two songs which Victor was understandably unwilling to meet. Neither side would relent, so Jackson never recorded. Victor officials told Bill that they were interested in recording him and, if he could get rid of his manager and his unreasonable demands, they would be more than happy to issue his material; Jackson was insufficiently interested to go back later.

Bill Jackson supported himself as best he could in the more than three decades that followed his move to Philadelphia. He worked as a building superintendent, janitor (and was working in this capacity when I first heard him some years ago), and even worked as a house boy for a history professor so that he might learn more of a subject that has always fascinated him. At present he is employed as a chauffeur by a firm that provides limousine service to the residents of Philadelphia's affluent Main Line area. When these recordings were made in January of 1962, it was not uncommon to find Bill working 12 to 18 hours a day.

Further, he had played only infrequently in the several years before these recordings. In 1961 I was producing a folk music program for Philadelphia's enterprising WHYY-FM, in the course of which a number of fine folk artists were discovered, recorded and presented.

Bill Jackson was the one single artist I was most anxious to find. Some five or six years previous I had heard him play briefly when he was working as a janitor in a building in my neighborhood and was greatly impressed with the fluency and striking complexity of his playing. Shortly afterwards he had moved out of the neighborhood and

repeated attempts to discover his whereabouts had proven futile. I continued looking even while in the armed service but was unable to find anyone who knew where to find Bill. Then, several months after the WHYY series had been under way, I heard that Bill was working at an exclusive girls' school in a Philadelphia suburb. I called the school office and was told that, yes, Bill Jackson had indeed worked there but had left some time before. One of the office workers recalled that he was then working for a taxi service and often saw him driving through the streets near the school. The next time she saw him she would tell him that I was looking for him.

Two weeks later Bill Jackson rang my door bell, and after a long conversation he tentatively played a few old numbers for me. The playing was a mere shadow of what is heard within, but the germ was still there. Over the next two months Bill practiced diligently and his old skill returned to him; he likewise began to recall all the songs of his youth in rural Maryland. We held recording sessions regularly, every two weeks or so, at my home to chart his progress and so he might hear how his playing might be improved. The recordings in this album were taped on January 1 and 3, 1962, and offer a representative sampling of the rich and varied music of Bill Jackson and, coincidentally, of the strong, fecund Negro folk music traditions of his native Maryland.

—Peter J. Welding

Note: All selections are played on a twelve string Stella guitar in the normal Spanish tuning, EADGBE. The songs are played in three keys, E, A and C. Those in C include *Old Rounder Blues, Careless Love, Freight Train Runs So Slow, You Ain't No Woman,* and *Don't You Put Your Hands On Me.* Songs played in A are *Long Steel Rail, Last Go Round,* and *Freight Train Blues.* The remaining selections are played in the key of E.

Bill Jackson can also be heard on Testament 5007 *Can't Keep From Crying - Topical Blues On The Death Of President Kennedy*

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