

Rounder Records 2009

South
Mississippi
Blues

The songs on this record are intended to illustrate the variety of black instrumental folk music that can be heard from the performers in one local tradition. All nine performers heard here grew up and learned their music in the vicinity of Tylertown (Walthall Co.), Mississippi, in the south-central part of the state near the Louisiana border. It is an area of small farming and pine forests dotted with lumber mills. Some of the farms are black owned, but many of local black population also worked on larger white owned plantations as sharecroppers or cutting timber and hauling stumps at the mills. Today much of the farm and lumber work has become automated, forcing many of the workers to leave the area. Thus, of the artists heard on this record only Isaac Youngblood was actually recorded in Walthall County, and even he has subsequently moved. Of the others, Esau Weary still works at the lumber mills in the general area, and Herb Quinn has bought himself a farm near Clifton, Louisiana. Myrt Holmes lives in retirement in Franklinton, Louisiana, and Roosevelt Holts and Eli Owens nearby in Bogalusa. Babe Stovall, O.D. Jones, and Dink Brister have all moved to New Orleans. The music that they perform, therefore, is seldom heard in the area where it originated, and in order to record it I had to do a considerable amount of detective work simply to find the musicians. But thanks especially to the help of Babe Stovall and Roosevelt Holts I was able to make these recordings in the field between 1965 and 1971. I believe that they present a balanced picture of what black instrumental folk music was like in this area during the twentieth century and also show that folk music of a high quality and considerable variety can still be heard in the South today.

All nine of these musicians know each other, and most have at one time or another played together in various combinations. They fall into three main groups according to the part of the country where they grew up and learned music. From northwest of Tylertown come Myrt Holmes, Herb Quinn, Babe Stovall, O.D. Jones, and Dink Brister. Their style of music is largely out of the string band tradition. As they played for both white and black dances, their repertoires are highly eclectic, including not only blues but also ballads, minstrel songs, and instrumental dance pieces, a few of them borrowed from white tradition. Myrt Holmes, born in 1890, always liked to play baseball more than guitar, but he was still making music on his own guitar when I recorded him in 1966. He helped to teach guitar to his younger half-brother Babe Stovall who is a professional street singer in New Orleans today. Babe, born the youngest of twelve children in 1907, is the most active musician of the entire group today. Herb Quinn, born in 1896, dominated the music of Tylertown for many years until a throat operation around 1950 caused him to give up playing regularly. He is proficient on guitar, mandolin, violin, string bass, and piano. His string band once played six nights a week for both black and white dances, and he taught many younger musicians in the area, both black and white. Among these were O.D. Jones and Dink Brister, both born in 1914. All of these men are related through a complex set of blood and marital ties. Cousins to each other and more distantly related to the preceding group are Roosevelt Holts, Issac Youngblood, and Esau Weary. They are from east of Tylertown and began playing music similar to that of the previous group but later came more under the influence of the blues. Holts, born in 1905, spent some time in Jackson with Tommy Johnson around 1937 and travelled in the Delta playing blues. Youngblood was born in 1912 and was for many years considered to be about the finest blues performer around on both guitar and piano in a quartet. Esau Weary, born in 1917, is also proficient on both guitar and piano and is today probably one of the last of the sawmill piano players. In addition to playing fine blues, he frequently plays organ at churches and piano for a white country and western group with whom he has recorded. The final artist on this record is Eli Owens, born in 1908 southeast of Tylertown near Dexter. Although he is among the younger musicians here, he represents the most archaic tradition, because his music has been passed down in his family, some of it going back to his

great grandfather. He also played with a number of white musicians. He has played guitar, harmonica, quills, and mouth bow and is heard here on three of those instruments.

In editing this album I have tried to present a balance between individual and string band styles, though it was difficult in many cases to assemble bands and obtain satisfactory performances of songs that had not been practiced in several years. Thus I am unable to present any violin playing here, although that was once a major instrument in the Tylertown musical scene. I have also tried to present representative examples of the various musical strands that have historically entered this tradition. For instrumental music these would be minstrel and dance tunes, archaic blues, more modern blues often commercially influenced, and spirituals.

Of the minstrel and dance pieces Eli Owens' *Rabbit on a Log*, *Old Hen Cackle*, and *Ida Red Sally Goodin* come from the mixed white and Negro tradition that goes back at least to the nineteenth century. All of these pieces have been handed down in his family, and Owens believes that they are at least one hundred years old. *Ida Red Sally Goodin* is performed on an African-derived mouth bow which operates on the same principle as the jew's harp. The instrument has passed over into white tradition and has been recorded in the Ozarks, but this is the first recording of it from black tradition in the United States. Owens makes it from a green sapling and fishing wire and much prefers its sound to that of the store bought jew's harp which he also plays. He learned the technique and this piece from his great grandfather, who was also the source for *Rabbit on a Log*, a tale of chicken thievery better known to many as *Gonna Make It to My Shanty If I Can*. Owens' guitar playing in an open tuning is extremely archaic and seems to owe something to banjo technique. *Sweet Bunch of Daisies* by Babe Stovall and Herb Quinn is the sort of waltz that the string bands would play for white dances. It is well known to country music fans through a 1920's version by McMichen's Melody Men, which may be the source for this recording although the song itself comes from an earlier tin pan alley source. Babe Stovall's *Candy Man* played here two different ways is a showpiece for Tylertown guitarists. Blind Gary Davis played a similar version to the delight of coffee house audiences. Stovall's *Maypole March*, structurally a blues, was the first piece he learned to play as a youngster when his school class would circle the maypole. Many black and white guitarists all over the south know variants of it as an instrumental showpiece, and Stovall himself normally plays it as an instrumental, though he improvised a verse for this recording. His *Boll Weevil* ballad is a song that originated with that insect pest in Texas and spread together with it across the South, being learned by both blacks and whites who were equally affected by its depredations. Stovall's version with the refrain, "He had a home in the cotton bloom," is typical of the usual form this ballad takes. Roosevelt Holt's *Home Town Skiffle* probably derives from a 1929 recording by a group of Paramount all-stars, though his version here is greatly altered from the original.

There are several archaic blues on this record. Some of them like *See See Rider*, *Hesitating Blues* (composed by W.C. Handy in 1915), and Herb Quinn's *Casey* are known all over the South, the latter piece being more familiar as *Poor Boy Long Ways from Home* or *Hobo, You Can't Ride This Train*. It is always played in knife (as here) or bottleneck style with frequent instrumental breaks and is one of the oldest blues ever documented. *Forty-Four Blues* has long been a standard piece for pianists all along the Mississippi River, though Esau Weary's version is unusual for abandoning the "gun" theme for more conventional blues lyrics. O.D. Jones' *Bye, Bye, Baby*, Myrt Holmes' *Run Here, Fairo*, and Eli Owens' *Ways Like the Devil* are all composed by stringing traditional blues verses together, a standard practice for folk blues. Holmes' piece gives a good idea of what the blues sounded like around the turn of the century when this genre of song was only beginning to attain popularity. Owens says he learned *Ways Like the Devil* from Harrison Lee Bridges who came from Oak Vale, northeast of Tylertown, and recorded it in the 1920's. I have,

however, been unable to locate this recording and am inclined to think that the piece comes strictly from oral tradition.

The remaining blues on this record represent more modern influences on Tylertown's local tradition. Roosevelt Holts' *Big Fat Mama Blues* was learned from the great Tommy Johnson who married Holts' cousin and moved to Tylertown around 1935 and stayed for a couple years. Holts followed Johnson back to Jackson where he improved his blues playing. His *Mean Conductor Blues* combines traditional elements that he learned in that city. Eli Owens' *Muleskinner Blues* is derived from Jimmie Rodgers' *Blue Yodel No. 8*, a record which Owens once owned. Rodgers was known personally to many of Tylertown's black musicians though not to Owens. Owens did, however, play this piece frequently as a young man with two local white guitarists from whom he learned the "rapping" style. He has transformed Rodgers' Swiss-style yodel into a more typical blues falsetto moan. Finally, Esau Weary's *You Don't Have to Go* is loosely based on a 1953 hit blues of the same title by Jimmy Reed.

The only church song on this record is Babe Stovall's *Do, Lord, Remember Me*. Although most of these musicians played mainly blues and dance pieces, they all know at least one spiritual which they play as a special request for listeners. Often these pieces, like the one on this record, become exercises in instrumental pyrotechnics. Stovall frequently plays church songs walking around with the guitar behind his head!

The pieces on this record point out the complexity of the musical tradition in one black folk community. Yet there are thousands of other communities in the South today with comparable traditions, many of which could probably be documented much more easily than the disrupted Tylertown tradition. I hope that the variety and quality of music on this record may induce other researchers to begin this task of documentation.

— David Evans

