NOTE: The following remarks have been transcribed from a tape recorded interview between Bill Jackson and the writer. Only Jackson's remarks have been included here.

I was born in Granite, Maryland, February 22, 1906, into a family of five. I first started singing and playing when I was fifteen years old...no one else in the family played. I just got interested. I saw a fellow by the name of Jim Fuller -- he was about twelve years older than me -- playing and all, and I just liked it. And then he taught me a few pieces and I just went on from that.

It was the way that he played...there was just something about it that just struck me. I don't know exactly what...it's hard to explain. But the way he picked and sang, and that lonesomeness in it, I just felt it was an outlet for my emotions or something like that. Music didn't make any impression until I heard him play. He brought everything to a head. He was one of the most accomplished (musicians) I have ever heard, and I haven't heard one until today -- outside of Maggie Matthews -- who could touch him.

After I learned a few chords and all from him -- I guess about six months or so -- I got so that I could go for myself and I started playing for houseparties and things like that. Well, I followed it on out, I guess, until I was about 25 years old. They used to call me "Blue Bill."

The towns in the area were about equal, white and Negro. Most of the industry there was quarry, sawmill, and farm work and, of course, institutional work like at the college.

Down there in the wintertime, why, that's all we did -- sit around and play music and all. There were saloons there at that time too. Of course, they went out around 1921, I think it was. And then, everybody just congregated at houses...one party after another. That's the way it worked. But there were no clubs or nothing like that for musicians to play at.

In the summertime, sometimes in the evening, you'd hear them sitting outside of their homes playing their guitars. Bunch of them get together and they'd get to singing, having a good time. Lot of times, like in the fall when they were making apple butter, a great gathering would get together and they'd nail down a platform and then they'd have what they call these reel dances, jig dancing, buck dancing and like that. The music would be from maybe three pieces -- like, guitar, banjo and mandolin, or violins -- three or four pieces. They'd play blues and folksongs and like that. One of the favorite banjo pieces was GREEN CORN, YELLOW CORN, HOP AROUND MY JIMMY-JOHN; and THE FOX AND THE HOUNDS; and another piece called RIP VAN WINKLE; and old railroad pieces.

This was in the early 1920s. I had heard of railroad songs long before I had heard of Jimmy Rodgers. All those fellows used to play pieces pertaining to railroads.

That was another outlet too. A lot of the men through that section worked on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. All the time they would be working lining track or spiking they would be singing songs. And they'd make up songs about different favorite trains they liked.

There were a lot of gang songs. In fact, they worked by songs. If they was lining the track, they would have a man -- what we'd call the lead man -- he'd be between the foreman and the gang and he would sing these songs and the men would line the track. One of them was about OLD UNCLE BUD AND HIS DAUGHTER. They would sing about:

Run here, mama, and look at sis,
She's out in the alley tryin' to do that twist

and

Here comes Ring with his arm in the sling

and such things as that. Anything to keep in time and the men would line the rail by that. Then when he'd holler: "Can't you line 'er, boys" and then they'd fall in and throw their shoulders against their bars and line the rail.

But everything was done by singing. This set the rhythm for the work. Then, he might sing JOHN HENRY, or when they would be spiking rails or something like that probably the lead man would be singing about "This old hammer killed John Henry, but it can't kill me" and all like that. And then he'd holler: "Can't you line 'er, boys, can't you line 'er." They used to sing IDA RED, a great banjo song, and the men used to spike and line rails from that.

All through the 1920s these gangs would sing these pieces and all, but in the '30s it sort of went out. When I came here I used to see the men working on the Pennsylvania (Railroad), but they didn't go in for that. I never heard that, but it was down through Maryland when we worked on the Baltimore and Ohio. All the men, they'd sing while they would be working.

In every gang they had a lead man. It's all he done. The foreman would, say, be up the track about a hundred yards from the gang and he would issue the orders down and say whether to hit it again or whether not to. And then the lead man would transmit the orders to the gang and he would sing and the men would work under his directions. He would give directions in song, in rhythm. These leaders were men with a natural gift as songsters.

And it was enjoyable, you know. Even if the work was hard, you didn't feel it because the song and the rhythm and everything, you just enjoyed it.

I worked on the Baltimore and Ohio in 1921 and 1922. When I first started I was a water boy, then I got to be a spiker because I loved to spike rails. I used to spike rails with a fellow who was from Tennessee and I used to love to hear the ringing of the hammer. I used to love to spike and keep the peen of the hammer turning all the time in my hand, but I'd always hit the spike with the same peen every time. It was just in the blood.

We had what they called a floating gang. We'd go in from one section to the other -- in fact, all over the road. And they had sleeping cars and they cooked on there and everything. We just lived right on that.

Everybody had guitars or mandolins, violins and so forth, and we'd sit up half of the night playing and singing. Next morning, go right on back to work.

A lot of the fellows in Maryland, no matter what their lines of work -- whether they worked on farms, in quarries, or sawmills -- each one of them had their own individual songs. They had songs to fit whatever work that they were doing. If they worked on a sawmill, probably the sound of the saw going through the log would inspire them with a song. And they'd make up a song from that.

The same way like working on the farm. Might be a mule that had certain characteristics that might inspire him to make up a song off of this mule. So they'd do that.

I know I used to hear fellows come in off of farms...there were certain horses or mules that were there that they liked. Maybe he might be a good lead mule and have a name, Bessie or Kate or something like that, and they'd make up a song from that mule.

But all the songs would be different. The sawmill songs would be different from the farmhands' and the farmhands' would be different from the railroad gangs. And this would extend to the music too.

LONG STEEL RAIL -- that's from being out on the road and hungry and in the cold, no place to go. And that was the birth of that song.

I remember a fellow -- it was about 30 some years ago -- he was sitting down and playing the banjo and I was in my twenties and this fellow was about fifty years old. There was a bunch of honey bees swarming around and they settled on a tree. All of a sudden he listened to them and listened to their drone and he started to plunking, picking it up on his banjo and he made up a song from that about the honey bees. So, anything that inspired them to song they'd make up a song off of that. That's the way it was.

The first person I ever heard sing CARELESS LOVE was a girl. It's possible that this girl had had a lot of bad luck in love and it inspired her to make this song from that. That's the way she expressed herself. TROUBLE IN MIND -- that's from some experience that someone had in life, maybe a lover running out or something like that, and that's where it all stemmed from.

Now when records came in, back in Maryland, the people there would probably pick the music that came closest to the kind of music they were used to hearing and making down there. The popular record artists -- ones that everyone around there would buy -- were Bessie Smith, Sara Martin, Clara Smith, Blind Blake, Fletcher Henderson, Tampa Red, Blind Lemon Jefferson and so on like that.

Now, a lot of the people would change the songs around to fit their own way and sing them a little different (than the records). Down around my section there used to be a lot of fellows that played guitar and they would -- although they weren't recorded or anything -- play like they wanted it. And it sounded good. Of course, I always have said there's a lot of men out on the street who were a lot better than the artists who were on recordings. The most admired and imitated of local musicians were Jim Fuller; Maggie Matthews; Thelbert Nicholas; and Henry King, who could play any kind of stringed instrument and whistle two parts -- like alto and soprano -- at the same time.

I came to Philadelphia, August 29, 1927. For a while at first every weekend I'd go back. For about two or three years I did that. I've been living here off and on ever since then.

In 1928, this man heard me play at a house one time. I had never met him before, but I happened to be sitting down playing LONG STEEL RAIL and OLD ROUNDER, and he liked it and told me that he knew some people at the Victor Record Co. and he thought they'd be glad to put it on a record. He wanted me to go down with him; and he'd "sponsor" me, get behind me, act as my manager.

Well, after he talked and talked, I decided I'd go and try it. So I went down, and the company they liked the piece very well and they wanted me to make it, but this fellow insisted on getting a lot -- he didn't want hundreds, he wanted thousands -- and, they of course wouldn't go for that. But they told me if I wanted to go on my own that they would accept it. But then I never bothered anymore.

What are the blues? The way I would say it it's sort of an inward and unexpressible all-overness. It just gets all over you -- like religion. It's just in you and you can't express it -- not fully -- except in music or song.

Among the younger generation the blues seem to be dying out, but I still think it's in the background of the older generation. It's just with them.... And after the older people pass away, somehow or other I have a feeling that it will revive itself again. I don't know why, but I believe it will revive again. It's like anything else: maybe this decade it'll be hot, and then it will die out and come into existence again one or two decades later. That's the way I feel about the blues.

-- Peter J. Welding

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