

DEEP RIVER OF SONG



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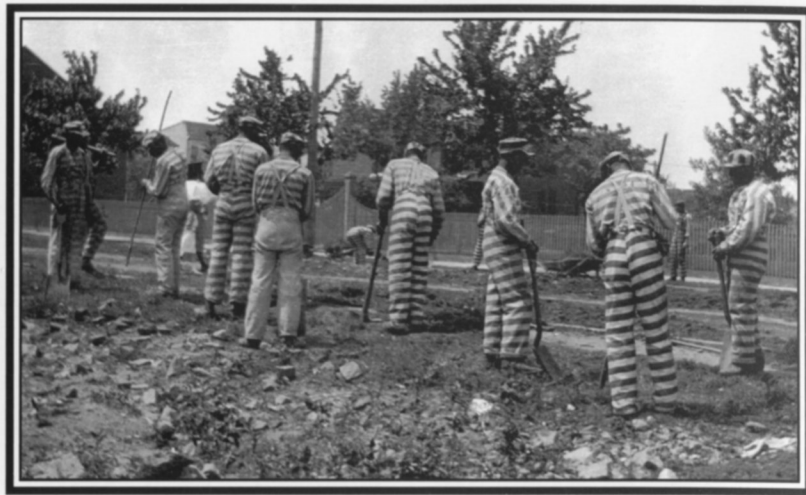
DEEP RIVER OF SONG



Virginia and the Piedmont

Minstrelsy, Work Songs, and Blues





Prisoners from State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia

Photo courtesy of The Library of Virginia

*Deep River / Deep River, Land / Deep River, Land,
I want to cross over in a ca'm time.*

—From *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax

About THE DEEP RIVER OF SONG series: More than half a century separates us from the performances in this series, and nearly all of the artists who gave them to us have “crossed over” in that time, leaving us these treasures in trust so that we might be delighted, informed, and edified by them. Each song tells its own story, but together they form an epic of a people seeking to ford a turbulent river of oppression and disadvantage, a people who brought forth another life-giving river of untold riches; a deep river of song from which all may draw.

It was this tradition that John A. Lomax and his son, Alan, sought to preserve and document when they began their field recording for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress in 1933, and it was this same source that Alan Lomax sought to replenish in 1981 when he and Peter B. Lowry reviewed more than a thousand field recordings of black music made by the Lomaxes in the South, the Southwest, Haiti, and the Bahamas.

Alan Lomax spent the summer of 1978 in Mississippi with John Bishop and Worth Long, shooting the program *Land Where the Blues Began*. “I discovered to my consternation that the rich traditions that my father and I had documented had virtually disappeared,” he wrote. “Most young people, caught up by TV and the hit parade, simply did not know anything about the black folklore that their forebears had produced and that had sustained and entertained generations of Americans. I resolved to try to do something about this situation, so far as I could.”

Lomax and Lowry eventually compiled 12 albums at the library, with more planned. The compilations were “organized in a way that might help to show blacks and other Americans the beauty, variety, the regional traits and African characteristics of this great body of song.” These albums bear witness to a transformative moment that saw the creation of a new singing language, new musical forms, and thousands of songs that belong in the first rank of human melodies. They evoke now-vanished musical worlds, showing how black style developed as settlement moved westward from the Carolinas to Texas, and how regional styles branched forth along the way.

“This music is a thing of very great beauty — a monument to the extraordinary creativity of the black people of North America,” Lomax wrote. “No song style exists anywhere that can surpass this material for sheer variety, originality, and charm. Yet its most genuine aspects are little known today and are fast fading out of currency under the pounding of the media.” He hoped that this series could help “restore to the American consciousness, and especially to African-Americans, a heritage that is about to be altogether lost.” Perhaps now, as we enter the twenty-first century, we are close enough to the “ca’m time” of songs and dreams for this restoration to take place.

If I live to see tomorrow,
gonna roll in my fair brown's arms.

Got the blues and I can't be satisfied. Mmmm, mmmm
Well, I got the blues, babe, and I can't be satisfied.
Going down by the river and hang down my head
and cry.

I've been mistreated, and I can't be satisfied.
I've been mistreated, and I can't be satisfied.

Yes, I'm going away to leave,
to get you off of my mind.
Babe, I'm going away to leave you,
get you off my mind.
Says, I'm goin' away to leave you, baby,
to worry you off my mind.
And I won't be worried, honey, about you all the time.

I done played this piece, babe, 'til my fingers got sore.
Now it ain't nothing doing, I ain't gonna play no more.

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er, and to Spivacke's amazement, did nothing but talk to him for hours. [Lomax] encouraged the blind musician to tell his life story, "swapped songs with him, [and] did everything but make records. . . ." When the equipment was set up and the blind singer brought in, Lomax told Spivacke to do the recording while he went off to visit a neighboring camp. The performer "had been so well prepared by [Lomax]. That's all I had to do was to ask him to sing one song after another and turn over the records and set the needles, etc." Spivacke had seen Lomax at work and learned firsthand the trials and tribulations of field collecting. When he took over as head of the music division of the Library of Congress the following year, he was one of Lomax's firmest allies.³

When he arrived at the State Penitentiary in Richmond, John A. Lomax naturally expected to add to the documentation of the musical culture that he loved and had been researching for many years. As an experienced folk music collector, he had good idea of what to look for, but collecting was always an adventure much dependent on the serendipitous. Lomax could not have been sure ahead of time that he would meet anyone with the genius of Jimmie Strothers — the blind banjo player described above by Harold Spivacke — though this was exactly the sort of performer he sought. Frequently he was presented by the prison officials with "showcase" musicians or groups like the quartet that initially greeted him at the State Farm in Lynn; hence, it would appear that he recorded fewer than half of the musicians that he met and auditioned on these expedi-

tions. In Virginia, however, he located not only Strothers but also such strong and interesting performers as Jimmie Owens, Rollie Lee Johnson, Willie Williams, Samuel Jones, Joe Lee, and Ezra Lewis. Female performers are absent from this collection, as was almost always the case in the Lomaxes' prison recordings.

The singers Lomax recorded sang of subjects closely tied to the agrarian cycles of growing and harvesting crops — "Corn-Shucking Time" (track 2), the misery inflicted by the boll weevil ("Boll Weevil," track 7), and the difficult economic times faced by struggling farmers ("Po' Farmer," track 8) — all themes with wide appeal among both African-American and white Southern farmers, sharecroppers, and laborers. These topics also suggest that many of the troubles that plagued the "old" South persisted or reemerged under the new, progressive vision of a South being transformed by education, technology, industry, and social and racial equality. Other subjects touched on in this collection are that of law enforcement and punishment (which then as now, fell disproportionately on African Americans). Ezra Lewis's "Tin Can Alley" (track 22) might be an appeal for civil rights as well as a "jail-house blues." Joe Lee's "This Land of Georgia" (track 13) recounts the horrific maiming of a man "for blaspheming the name of God." Another of Lee's fascinating songs on the theme of freedom and escape ("I'll Go On," track 10) seems to be plea for conveyance from this earth to a more hospitable "land of corn and wine."

Traditional spirituals, unreservedly devotional in feeling,

also appear in this compilation — for example, Michael Lewis and group's "I Feel the Spirit Moving" (track 11). Two of the tracks on the album — both recorded at the State Penitentiary in Raleigh, North Carolina — are closely allied to the folk-blues tradition. Robert Higgins's "Prison Blues" (track 24) contains phrases from hymns as well as from vernacular speech. Blind Joe's "When I Lie Down Last Night" (track 26), one of the more compelling performances on the album, follows the Piedmont style of 12-bar blues commonly found in the Southeast. On the whole, however, the blues figures less prominently here than in the recordings the Lomaxes made in Mississippi.

In Alan Lomax's original conception, this volume of the *Deep River of Song* series is meant to document "the land where Black minstrelsy took its rise and where work song traditions, now common to the whole South, emerged." Work songs are, in fact, generously represented (see, for example, "Bitin' Spider," track 20). "Wild Ox Moan" (track 6) is a particularly interesting example of a field holler — an ornamented, highly improvised work song performed solo. As Lomax observed, by the time of these recordings work songs were a pan-Southern tradition, but it is likely that they originated on the farms and plantations of the Atlantic coast, which was settled two centuries earlier than the Deep South, with even older links to the African continent. Historically, the sounds of the highly coordinated group work song and the field holler are embedded in the musical fabric of the Deep South and the Mississippi Delta. This influence is not so palpable, however, in the music of the upland and Piedmont sections of the Middle Atlantic States. The familiarity with

field hollers that is clearly demonstrated on the commercial recordings by Deep South blues artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, George "Bullet" Williams, "King" Solomon Hill, Texas Alexander, and Eddie "Son" House is largely absent from recordings by their eastern contemporaries and counterparts such as Blind Blake, Curley Weaver, Julius Daniels, Blind Boy Fuller, and Josh White.

From today's perspective, however, it is the minstrel material that stands out as the most significant for the musical traditions of the Middle Atlantic states; this material proved to be influential in the development of pop music as a whole. This is particularly true in Virginia, which gave birth to of minstrelsy's most celebrated early groups — the Virginia Minstrels, founded in 1843. Although this group was closely associated with New York City and a wider entertainment network, it is nonetheless notable that as the first group to mount a minstrel show it adopted the Virginia moniker. Such early minstrel shows featured comedy and drama in addition to music, and created an almost immediate sensation — especially in the North, where they brought an often idealized and stereotypical view of everyday black life to audiences who were largely unfamiliar with African Americans.

Virtually all of the pre-Civil War minstrel shows, and certainly all of the most popular ones, featured white performers; all-black minstrel troupes did not come into vogue until Reconstruction. These early white performers made a specialty of performing part of their act in blackface, often to the accompaniment of the banjo, an instrument of African derivation. Songs featuring the

³ Nolan Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867–1948* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 392.

four-string banjo were a staple of minstrel shows. Along with other white minstrel artists such as Bill Whitlock and Dan Emmet, it was Joel Sweeney, a Southerner of Irish descent, who did the most to popularize "Negro" music, combining it with stage shows that quickly captivated the nation. Sweeney was a professional banjo player who by the 1830s was touring as a performer with an itinerant circus that traveled in Virginia and North Carolina prior to a swing north. Born and raised near Appomattox Court House in south central Virginia, Sweeney learned to play from African-American banjo players in the 1820s. Through his later touring with the Virginia Minstrels, he helped to disseminate this black-derived music to a wider and increasingly multiracial audience. The minstrel material was then absorbed in stabilized form into the black repertoire. With relatively few exceptions, however, this genre was not well represented on commercial phonograph records. Black American artists from the southeastern United States — Peg Leg Howell, Will Bennett, and Lil McClintock, among others — who recorded in the 1920s and 1930s only hint at these complex links.⁴

The strong ties between early minstrelsy, black folk culture, and Virginia were no doubt known to John A. Lomax. These recordings indicate that he was aware of these important links when he visited the Commonwealth's State Farm nearly one hundred years after the beginnings of stage minstrelsy. Of the performers recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke during their brief trip to Lynn, **Jimmie Strothers** was perhaps the most intriguing. Lomax had

probably contacted the warden ahead of time and asked him to secure talent for their visit — the method for scouting talent he had been following since the early 1930s. The fact that he and Spivacke were greeted at the prison by a quartet and by Strothers makes this seem likely. Strothers's performances were rather brief — though none sound truncated or edited — but his warm strong voice, accomplished banjo technique, and interesting repertoire make a strong impact on the listener, who naturally hankers to hear more.

Lomax was clearly taken with Strothers and took time to draw him out, presumably discussing his life as well as his musical background. Unfortunately, we can only speculate as to the full extent of Strothers's repertoire. Six of the songs he recorded for Lomax and Spivacke were omitted from this collection. They are "Keep Away from the Bloodstained Bandits" (a version of which was later recorded by the rock group Jefferson Airplane), "Tennessee Dog," "Daddy, Where You Been So Long?," "Thought I Heard My Banjo Say," "Do, Lord, Remember Me," and "Poontang Little, Poontang Small" — a mixture of sacred, minstrelsy, and bluesy songs very much in keeping with the other selections presented here.

Of the other performers on the album, several subsequently had extensive professional recording and performing careers. Born Saunders Terrell in Greensboro, Georgia, in 1911, **Sonny Terry** started his musical odyssey in the late 1920s, "working the streets" as a harmonica player and singer in North Carolina and later

performing with traveling medicine shows. Eventually he teamed with Blind Boy Fuller, recording for Vocalion/ARC in the mid-to-late 1930s as an accompanist and occasionally as lead musician. In 1942 Sonny Terry moved north to become one of the original members of the topical folk group The Almanac Singers (based in New York City) and a participant in the 1940s folk revival circuit. With the almost constant companionship of guitarist Brownie McGhee, Terry forged a solid career playing for both black and white audiences across the United States and Europe. With the advent of the first "blues revival" that began in the early 1960s, the pair found a revitalized audience that consisted almost entirely of white enthusiasts, most of whom were probably unaware of their early careers. The three tracks heard on this CD were recorded by Alan Lomax in May 1942 while Lomax was working for the Library of Congress. They highlight Sonny Terry's distinctive falsetto voice, the rhythmic intensity of his attack, the uncanny animal imitations he achieved on the harmonica, and the subtle alterations in tone that make his playing remarkable.

The other known quantity in this collection is **The Golden Gate Quartet**, led by Willie Johnson with singer-guitarist Josh White, a star in his own right though not a member of the Gates. Founded in Norfolk, Virginia, in the early 1930s by four Booker T. Washington High School chums, the Golden Gate Quartet was one of the most popular and influential small vocal harmony groups to record during the 1930s and 1940s. They came from a long line of Hampton Roads quartets that began recording in the 1920s and were probably influenced by the rich maritime chantey

tradition of the area. By 1935, the Golden Gates, as they were best known, had moved beyond Tidewater Virginia and landed a daily program that was broadcast over the 50,000-watt WBT station in Charlotte, North Carolina. This well-received radio broadcast brought them to the attention of scouts — perhaps Eli Oberstein — for the Bluebird Recording Company (a subsidiary of RCA Victor). The group's records sold very well indeed, and their music influenced many other groups, not only in the Piedmont but also across the country. The Golden Gates' style, known as *jubilee*, affected an entire generation of gospel quartet singers. It features a half-spoken, half-sung lead vocal, a "pumping" bass vocalist singing a heavily syncopated line that moves independently of the lead singer, and themes drawn primarily from the Bible. Groups as diverse as the Trumpeteers and the Swan Silvertones fell under their sway and were especially taken with Willie Johnson's unique style of lead vocalizing. Throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, the Golden Gate Quartet influenced many other groups with their repertoire of mostly sacred material (as well as minstrel and pop tunes) — of which "Run, Sinner, Run" (track 16) was one of their most popular items.

Virtually nothing is known of the other performers presented in this collection. Their incarceration in Virginia and North Carolina may not necessarily mean that they were from the Piedmont, but there is nothing in their performances or song lyrics to suggest otherwise. Blind Joe (track 26) is very much in the mainstream of Piedmont blues singers, and the agrarian themes of the other singers are pan-Southern and do not betray any geographical origin.

⁴ Paul Oliver, in *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records*, discusses the dearth of this material.

Although John A. Lomax might not have foreseen today's emphasis on multiculturalism in the United States or the burgeoning scholarly and academic interest in regional and vernacular music (let alone the digital revolution that has fostered projects like this one), he was a genuine enthusiast and scholar of vernacular music and poetry, with a remarkably progressive vision. Fascinated with the origins of the creative process, Lomax recognized the worth of minstrel material and seemed to understand its critical place in the nation's musical culture. A sometimes uneasy marriage of white and black expressive culture, it was marginalized and disparaged at the time, but Lomax saw the need to document it systematically. Himself a white Southerner, he understood the need to document black protest, a controversial topic largely overlooked by scholars, with the notable exceptions of Lawrence Gellert and Elie Seigmeister.

The Lomaxes have thus left us with an interesting and informative aural document of the African-American musical forms of this region — especially work and banjo songs that are all but forgotten today. This music is a poignant reminder of a time when black people endured oppressive legal as well as social and economic restrictions. This anthology provides us with a glimpse into the world of rural black Southern music that was largely ignored by contemporary commercial record companies, a fact that makes the work of John and Alan Lomax of even greater importance to both scholars and fans of American music.

— *Washington, D.C., October 1999*

SONG NOTES

1. OLD DAN TUCKER (AFS 6095-A1)

Performed by the Golden Gate Quartet (Willie Johnson, baritone and lead; Henry Owens, first tenor; Clyde Riddick, second tenor; Orlandus "Dad" Wilson, bass) with Josh White (guitar). Recorded by Alan Lomax on December 20, 1940, at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C.

Founded in Norfolk, Virginia, by four high-school students in the early 1930s, the Golden Gate Quartet emerged as the premier "jubilee"-style quartet in the late 1930s. The group follows in the path of such Hampton Roads Quartets as the Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartet and the Excelsior Quartet, both of which performed secular and sacred repertoires. "Old Dan Tucker" is found in the repertoires of black and white performers, is properly associated with the earliest days of minstrelsy, and represents a frontier character and a "bad man" prototype that was found both in literature and song. This song and "Run, Sinner, Run" (track 16) were recorded at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress as part of an Emancipation celebration entitled "75 Years of Freedom: Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States."

*I came to town the other night,
Just to hear the noise and see the fight.*

*The watchman running all around,
Crying, "Old Dan Tucker done come to town."*

Chorus:

*So get out the way for Old Dan Tucker.
He's too late to get his supper.
Supper's over and dinner's a' cookin',
Old Dan Tucker just stand there lookin'.*

*Now Old Dan Tucker was a nice old man.
He used to drive our Darby Ram.
He sent it whizzing down the hill.
If it hadn't got up, he'd a' been there still. (Chorus)*

*Old Dan Tucker and I got drunk.
Fell in the fire and kicked up a chunk.
Fire coal got inside of his shoe.
Lord bless you, honey, how the ashes flew. (Chorus)*

2. CORN-SHUCKING TIME (AFS 742 A2)

Performed by Jimmie Strothers. Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

Little is known about Strothers apart from his incarceration in the Virginia State Farm and the fact that he was blind in 1936.⁶ The one known photograph of him was taken in 1936 and shows a man in late middle age, which suggests that he might have been born around 1880, and that his repertoire was a product of the post-Reconstruction South in which he would have lived as a young man. Certainly, the songs he recorded reflect

ties to the land, as in "Corn-shucking Time" or "I Used to Work on a Tractor" (track 5).

*Corn-shucking time, ah, corn-shucking time.
Ain't gonna bake that possum; tell you,
friends of mine.
'Til it's corn-shucking time; won't we have a time?
Ain't gonna bake that possum 'til that corn,
corn-shucking time.*

*Old Auntie, want to go to heaven,
but she say she is not gwine,
She say she is not going 'til that corn-shucking time.
'Cause she know she gonna bake that possum,
and then get tipsy on wine.
Well, she's ready to go to heaven at that corn,
corn-shucking time.*

*That corn-shucking time, corn-shucking time.
Ain't gonna bake that possum 'til corn-shucking time.
Corn-shucking time, my brother,
and won't we have a time?
Ain't gonna bake that possum 'til that corn,
corn-shucking time.*

3. JAYBIRD (AFS 747 A1)

Performed by Jimmie Strothers. Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

This is an interesting song that underscores Strothers's roots in the post-Reconstruction South and his proba-

⁵ See Bruce Bastin's *Red River Blues* for further information on this subject.

⁶ Ben Botkin's notes to AFS L10 state that Strothers once performed in a medicine show, but little else can be learned of his history.

ble agrarian background. His sprightly, finger-picked banjo playing provides a nice foil to his gruff but relaxed vocal. Jimmie Strothers's familiarity with minstrelsy is suggested by "Jaybird," a series of absurdities about animals framed by two verses portraying black people as tricksters. This type of song floated back and forth between the folk tradition and stage minstrelsy in the nineteenth century.

*White folks in the parlor, drinking up all their dram,
Darkies in the barnyard,
eating up the white folks' ham.*

*Jaybird trying to scratch back, sparrow trying to crow.
The young girls hop in the summertime,
blind man trying to sew.*

*Jaybird died with a whooping cough,
sparrow died with the colic.
I meet a bullfrog with a banjo on his back,
said he's gwine on down to the frolic.*

*Sparrow on the fence, jawin' at a log.
Bullfrogs in the pond, they are barking like a dog.*

*Nigger on the woodpile, can't count to seven,
Put him in a featherbed, he think he's gone to heaven.*

4. GEORGIA LAND (AFS 727 B1)

Sung by Jimmie Owen.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

"Georgia Land" is a superb performance that includes lyrical ideas commonly found in the African-American oral tradition of dance tunes and work songs. The song mediates between the twin themes of relationships with women and the work that calls for a man's attention. It's an earthy and rich performance made all the more compelling by Owens' midrange and sparsely ornamented a cappella vocal, underpinned by a fairly regular duple meter. Owens recorded two other selections for Lomax and Spivacke, which feature his and J. Brown's superb guitar accompaniment. "Georgia Land" is printed in *Our Singing Country* (pp. 284–85), where reference is made to other versions.

*My gal don't wear button-up shoes,
Her feet's too big for gaiters.
All she's fit for a dip of snuff
And a yellow yam potato.
Join her here, send her back,
Is you ever worked on the railroad track?*

*My dog died with the whooping cough,
My mule get distemper.
Me and my gal can't get along,
She's got a pretty bad temper.
Tighten on the backband, loosen on the bow.
Who in the world's that pickin' that banjo so?*

You go saddle the old gray mare

And I'll go plow old muley.

I'll make a turn 'fore the sun go down,

And I'll go back home to Julie.

Rowdy-o, rowdy-o,

Got the wagon loaded, let me see you go.

Take four wheels to hold a load,

Take two mules to pull double.

Take me back to Georgia land

And I won't be no trouble.

Whoa!

5. I USED TO WORK ON A 'TRACTOR

(AFS 744 A1)

Performed by Jimmie Strothers.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

This song is a bitter protest about mistreatment and financial exploitation. The word tractor in its title may be a mishearing by the researchers of "contractor."

*Used to work contractor, Mike Hardy was his name.
Wanted me to make four loads a day;
doggone mule was lame.
Went out early in the morning;
got stalled and stayed all day.
When I returned in the evening,
these are the words he'd say.*

Chorus:

*"Where in the world is you been all day?
Here's your money — get away!"
Rid that mule in that high-bushel corn.*

Old Mike Hardy, he was mad.

Give my money, and he got bad.

Rid that mule in that high-bushel corn.

(Repeat first verse and chorus)

Worked for his brother;

he was the same doggone mean [man?].

Went out early in the morning;

got stalled and stayed all day.

I returned that evening, these are the words he'd say.

(Chorus)

6. WILD OX MOAN (AFS 724-A2)

Performed by Rollie Lee Johnson.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

With its strong emotional flavor and its rather free meter, "Wild Ox Moan" illustrates a field holler at its best. John A. Lomax calls it "an old levee camp holler"; in Virginia, of course, there were no levee camps per se, but his point is well taken. Many work songs of this sort drifted between various occupations and the prison-song tradition with the movements of itinerant laborers. (Lomax also identifies "Bitin' Spider" [track 20] as a levee camp holler.) Johnson's performance of this solo work song ranks him as one of the best singers that Lomax found on this trip. It is replete with asides to his mule — probably his sole companion as he worked the field — which may have been prompted by Lomax's search for verisimilitude. That Lomax was looking for work songs is evident from the other songs he took down from Johnson: "Dock Cries," "Lifting Oysters,"

and the spiritual "When the Train Comes Along." The song about oyster harvesting suggests that Johnson may have once lived and worked along the coast of Virginia or Maryland; here he mentions Memphis, which may signify that he originated from or once worked in that area.

Whistling.

Spoken: *Get up here, mule, and [unintelligible].*

*Oh, I think I heard the wild ox moan.
Blind tiger, oh, blind tiger, oh, tell old gal.*

Spoken: *Get up, mule, and walk along here.*

*Oh, the big bald eagle, he done gone on down.
Blind tiger, oh, blind tiger, oh, and tell old gal.*

Spoken: *Giddy-up there, and go on a little bit here.*

*Oh, she's not my woman, just from my home.
I'd give her my money just to help her 'long.*

*I got nine feet of leather and a long head line.
Gonna knock him in his bottom 'til he go stone blind.
Oh, babe, 'til he go stone blind.*

Spoken: *Get up here, Mutt. Walk along a little bit.*

*Oh, she send my dinner, didn't know my name.
Oh, she give it to the whip boy with the bad,
sharp hand.*

Oh, big boat left Memphis, going round and round.

*And she struck blue money [Monday?]
and kept on down.
Oh, babe, she kept on down.*

*Oh I think I heard the wild ox moan.
Blind tiger, oh, blind tiger, oh, and tell old gal.*

John A. Lomax: *This song was led by, sung by Rollie Lee Johnson, an old levee camp holler, at Richmond, Virginia, May the thirty-first, 1936, through the courtesy of Major Euell for the benefit of the Library of Congress in Washington.*

7. BOLL WEEVIL (AFS 727 B1)

Performed by Willie Williams.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 30, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

The singer's vocal power, his timbre, and his text are reminiscent of an Alabama singer and harmonica player, Jay Bird Coleman, who recorded a version of this song for Gennett in 1927. While "Boll Weevil" as sung by whites and blacks (including Leadbelly) is often cast as a narrative song, it has also been sung as a work song or field holler (as by Vera Ward Hall). Williams sings his version in blues form and uses some of the inflections common to the blues. Though his range is more limited than that of the other singers heard here, his is the gruff and forceful vocal heard on "Railroad Wreck" (track 19). He is equally impressive when he leads a group of inmates singing a work song, "Bitin' Spider" (track 22), on the often-reiterated theme of distant love.

*Boll weevil been here, done bored his hole and gone.
Boll weevil been here, done bored his hole and gone.
You can tell by that, boll weevil won't be here long.
(Repeat first verse.)*

*If I could sing like a sea lark in the air,
I would be like boll weevil, fly from town to town.*

*Boll weevil here, boll weevil everywhere.
Boll weevil here, boll weevil everywhere.
Looked in my meal barrel, and boll weevil,
he was there.*

*Boll weevil flew up, he took a circle 'round the moon.
Boll weevil flew up, he took a circle 'round the moon.
Said "Good-bye, farmers, I'll see you another year."*

John A. Lomax: *This song was sung at the Virginia Penitentiary by Willie Williams through the courtesy of the officials of that institution for the benefit of the Library of Congress in Washington on May the thirtieth, 1936.*

8. PO' FARMER (AFS 729 A1)

Performed by Lemuel Jones.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

Agrarian protest songs are relatively uncommon in the African-American tradition. Perhaps they were rarely sought out by song collectors (with the notable exception of Lawrence Gellert) and overlooked by the commercial record companies. "Po' Farmer," then, is a rare example of an explicit complaint about the difficult life

and the problems faced by farmers as they eke out a living. It is performed in a relaxed and almost matter-of-fact manner, communicating Southern farmers' stoic endurance of their hard fate. White Southern farmers recorded similar songs of complaint and protest in the 1920s and 1930s. This song was printed in *Our Singing Country* (p. 281).

*Worked all the week and don't make enough
To pay my board and buy my snuff.*

Chorus:

*It's hard, it's hard,
It's hard on we poor farmers, it's hard.*

*Every night when I get home,
Peas in the pot and a old jawbone. (Chorus)
Spoken: Whoa, gee.*

*Worked all the week and don't make enough,
To pay my board and buy my snuff. (Chorus)
Spoken: Get up, here, Jim!*

*Worked all the week to sun to sun,
Fifteen cents when Saturday come. (Chorus)*

*Every night when I get home,
Peas in the pot and a old jawbone. (Chorus)*

*Every morning when I wake up,
Got to feed my horse and, oh, great God... (Chorus)*

*Every morning when I get up,
Feed old Jim and all packed up. (Chorus)*

9. **FOX CHASE** (AFS 6503 A3)

Performed by Sonny Terry (vocal and harmonica) and Brownie McGhee (vocal).

Recorded by Alan Lomax in May 1942 at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

This blind harmonica player and vocalist is one of the best-known performers on this compilation. For many years he teamed up with guitarist and singer Brownie McGhee to form one of the most respected, highly polished, and often-recorded folk blues acts. Born in rural Georgia, Terry spent his childhood in North Carolina before moving to New York City as a young man in the early 1940s. His virtuosity is well displayed on his version of the standard "Fox Chase." In the first half of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon to hear musicians imitate the sounds of animals, trains, and crying babies on the harmonica as well as on the fiddle, guitar, or piano. Sonny Terry's ability to blend his voice and harmonica to form a seamless whole is unparalleled in the recorded history of black American folk music. See also "John Henry" (track 21) and "Worried Blues" (track 27) for other tracks featuring Terry.

Brownie McGhee: *Sonny, I'm telling you about ole Kate. I told you she was the fastest dog. You gonna hear her open up in a minute, as soon as she gets a solid trace. She's not far enough away yet. Old Pete's right along in there somewhere. Now I hear her open up. Pete's got him good, and there he goes now. There go Pete right in behind him. Got him sitting down. Gettin' straight now. Gonna go right back by him. Wait there. Wait there. Listen! Go, Kate, go! Fastest dog in the South. Listen, listen, listen! Got him drunk now,*

got him drunk now. Old Pete's right along with her, too. Hear both of 'em again directly. Get yourself right along back by — hold it! Here they come. I thought I heard their voice now. There he go. There he go! Get on the horse and go and see what she done done now.

10. **I'LL GO ON** (AFS 749 A3)

Sung by Joe Lee. Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

"I'll Go On" is a verse-and-refrain spiritual that describes the transcendent experience of death and the passing over to "that land of corn and wine." It appears to be in the mainstream of Joe Lee's recorded repertoire. Lee, who was 71 years old at the time, recorded nine other selections with religious themes for Lomax, including "Rise, Run Along, Mourner," "When the King Was in Trouble, He Seen Handwriting on the Wall," and "Jesus Made Me What I Am." All are nineteenth-century spirituals that could be performed solo or by a vocal ensemble.

*Children, we gonna reach that land of corn and wine,
I'll go on, I'll go on.
We have reached that land of corn and wine.
I'll go on.
Yes, won't that be a mighty time?
I'll go on, I'll go on.
Be eating of the fruit and drinking of the wine.
I'll go on, I'll go on.
Want you to know just how I feel.
I'll go on, I'll go on.
When I get in that battlefield.*

I'll go on, I'll go on.

*Now, we gonna reach that land of corn and wine,
I'll go on, I'll go on.*

*Children, now we done reached that land of
corn and wine,
Lord, I'll go on.*

11. **I FEEL THE SPIRIT MOVING**
(AFS 728 A3)

Sung by Michael Lewis and group.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

Michael Lewis leads an unidentified group of convicts at the State Penitentiary, located not far from Richmond. They sing in a call-and-response form, with the entire ensemble unfailingly answering "Get away, Satan, get away." This stirring though brief performance is one of six recorded by this group. One was "Po' Laz'us" (probably the bad man song, not a spiritual), while another, "White Gal, Brown Gal, Black Gal" treats of social gradations based on skin color — also the subject of many blues by artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Barbecue Bob, and others.

*I feel the spirit moving.
Get away, Satan, get away.
Holy Spirit from heaven.
Get away, Satan, get away.*

*In this congregation, there is a soul unsaved.
Standing in destruction, just come in and be saved.*

*I feel the spirit moving.
Get away, Satan, get away.
Holy Spirit from heaven.
Get away, Satan, get away.*

*Man, your days are numbered, do not tarry so long.
Sinners hear a rumble, then stumble and be gone.
I feel the spirit moving.
Get away, Satan, get away.
Holy Spirit from heaven,
Get away, Satan, get away.*

John A. Lomax: *This song was led by Michael Lewis, accompanied by a group of his friends, at Richmond, Virginia, May the thirty-first, 1936, and was sung for the benefit of the Library of Congress through the courtesy of Major Euell.*

12. **WE'RE ALMOST DOWN TO
THE SHORE** (AFS 747 B2)

Performed by Jimmie Strothers.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

Much like his fellow banjo players Uncle Dave Macon and John Henry Howard, Strothers drew from the deep well of late-nineteenth-century musical styles. In addition to banjo instrumentals, coon songs,⁷ and lyric songs, these musicians were well acquainted with religious material. Strothers' version of the spiritual "We're Almost Down to the Shore," with its Biblical text and its spirit of determination and sense of purpose, is typical

⁷ Coon songs, an integral part of late-nineteenth-century minstrel music, caricatured African Americans and parodied black speech.

of many sacred songs popular in the late nineteenth century.

*Fight on, fight on, children, and don't turn back.
We are almost down to the shore.
Fight on, fight on, children, and don't turn back.
We are almost down to the shore.*

*Fisherman Peter on the sea,
drop your nets and follow me.
We are almost down to the shore.
Fight on, fight on, children, and don't turn back.
We are almost down to the shore.*

*Moses died in the days of old,
where he was buried never been told.
We are almost down to the shore.
Fight on, fight on, children, and don't turn back.
For we are almost down to the shore.*

*God called Moses on the mountaintop,
Placed his laws in Moses' heart.
We are almost down to the shore.*

*Placed commandments in Moses' mind.
Said, "Moses, don't leave my children behind."
We are almost down to the shore.
Fight on, fight on, children, and don't turn back.
We are almost down to the shore.*

13. **THIS LAND OF GEORGIA** (AFS 835 B2)⁸
Sung by Joe Lee.
Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on
June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

Although I cannot be certain, Joe Lee's "This Land of Georgia" might have been inspired by a true incident. Lee may have been reporting on hearsay about an incident of spontaneous combustion: "Way down yonder in the land of Georgia. / The man was burning for blaspheming the name of God." This intriguing a cappella performance, with its vivid and striking imagery stands out as one of the most unusual and touching in this collection. A similar version of this song was collected from an African-American singer in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, in 1942 by a Works Project Administration fieldworker. Harry M. Hyatt encountered the story as a folk legend in York County in 1936.

*People in the land of Georgia,
little they cared about God.
But when the news got in the land,
man a-burning on the log.*

*He was sitting down gambling;
his friends came frightened and scared.
Flames of fire came out of his mouth,
came through his nostrils and ears.
Let me tell 'bout the man was burning,
Way down yonder in the land of Georgia.
That man was burning for blaspheming
the name of God.*

*People in the land of Georgia truly would not stay.
Then they sent for a saw just to try to get him away.
When the saw did come, begin to sawing the log.
And as the sawdust fell,
it commence to dripping blood.
Let me tell 'bout the man was burning,
Way down yonder in the land of Georgia.
The man was burning for blaspheming
the name of God.*

*Let me tell you 'bout the man was burning,
Way down yonder in the land of Georgia.
That man was burning for blaspheming
the name of God.*

14. **CAN'T HIDE** (AFS 270 B2)
Sung by an unidentified group.
Recorded by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, probably
on December 22, 1934, at the State Penitentiary,
Raleigh, North Carolina.

This is the earliest recording heard on this compilation and one of a handful made at the State Penitentiary in Raleigh, North Carolina, shortly before Lomax traveled north to New York City with Huddie Ledbetter. "Can't Hide" is cast in the antiphonal form that is the signature of many genres of African-American roots music, from work songs to soul. We hear what appears to be a quartet arrangement. The theme — one can't hide from God — is a common one for spirituals and is especially strong in the black tradition. The Norfolk Jubilee Quartet recorded a version of this song in 1927.

Leader: ...To the rocks...

Group: You can't hide.
Leader: Find no hiding place.
Group: You can't hide.
Leader: It ain't no hiding place.
Group: Oh, you can't hide.
Together: And you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.

*And my Jesus calling. You can't hide.
Oh, my Jesus calling. You can't hide.
Ain't no hiding place. Oh, you can't hide.
And you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*You may run to the mountains. You can't hide.
Ain't no hiding place. Oh, you can't hide.
When my Jesus said, "You can't hide."
Oh, you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*When my Jesus calling. You can't hide.
When my Jesus calling. You can't hide.
And then it is declared. You can't hide.
Ah, and you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*You may run to the mountains. You can't hide.
But the mountain called out, "You can't hide."
Ain't no hiding place. You can't hide.
And you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*Oh, you can't hide, sinner. You can't hide.
Oh, you can't hide, sinner. You can't hide.
Ain't no hiding place. You can't hide.
And you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*You may run away. You can't hide.
When you come back. You can't hide.*

⁸ Glenn Hinson's notes to BRL Records 007 list this as "The Man Was Burning."

*Lord, Jesus said. Lord, you can't hide.
Lord, you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*You may run away. You can't hide.
When you come back. You can't hide.
Ain't no hiding place. You can't hide.
And you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*And you can't hide, sinner. You can't hide.
And you can't hide, sinner. You can't hide.
Ain't no hiding place, Lord. You can't hide.
And you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

*When my Jesus calling. You can't hide.
And then He did declare, "You can't hide."
Then Jesus said, "Lord, you can't hide.
And you can't hide, sinner, you can't hide.*

15. NOAH AND THE FLOOD (AFS 270 B1)

Performed by Norman Haskins.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax on
December 22, 1934, at the State Penitentiary,
Raleigh, North Carolina.

"Noah and the Flood" embroiders on the Bible story of Noah, his ark, and the flooding of the earth. During the 1930s and 1940s, the story of Noah and the flood was popular with preachers and jubilee-style quartets, most notably the Golden Gate Quartet. This powerful rendition, partly sung, partly chanted in preacherlike style, is enhanced by Haskins's moving performance. Sadly, this was at a time when the Lomaxes were still saddled with poor recording equipment, and part of the text could not be understood because of these technical

limitations. Nonetheless, Haskins wove a compelling, often surreal and challenging narrative unlike anything that I have encountered. Regrettably, this is Haskins's only recording.

Chorus:

*Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...*

*Well, my God sent nineteen angels
from the throne of glory,
Down in the poor,
Said to work among the fields of the poor.
God sent nineteen angels from the thrones of glory
To help old Noah to build a...
Noah was building the ark one hundred
and twenty years.*

*Said, had one hundred and twenty nails to drive,
Said, had one hundred twenty rooms complete.
Said, "Oh, Noah, what you been doing?"
"Well, all the time you been teaching the people,
Lord, to repent."*

*My God's gonna 'stroy this world by water;
They call me a fool all over the land.
But the old man kept on building for a home in the
kingdom land.*

Chorus:

Well, you bound, for the... kingdom land.

*Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...*

*Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...*

*Well, my God sent nineteen angels
from the throne of glory,
Down in the poor.
Said to work among the fields of the poor.
Said, God sent nineteen angels
from the throne of glory.
"Ah, bring your wife and the three sons and
their wives."
"Ah, what you gonna do?"
"One day, brother Noah, I'm gonna prove to the world
I'm God of all power."
God almighty open, no man can shut.
God almighty shut, no man can open.
God, all o' my life.*

*The angels take their vows.
Said, into the flood He was sending one angel, Lord.
Way east, He was sending one angel.
Way north, He was sending one angel.
Well, way south, He was sending one angel.
Said, way west.
Well, six angels come over to hold up the folds of the
clouds and let water come down
Just like a flood.*

*"Well, six angels, I want you to hold out the folds
of the field.
Let water fall off like a mountain.
Well, fourth angel, well, third angel, well,
the second angel, well, first angel,
I want you to gather up the little pieces of ten clouds
Ah, get 'em in a solid,
March to the fields."*

*Said, water is falling, the water is rising.
The water got up by the fields of the door.
Said, the death went up to the upper floor.
When they got there, said, the water was there.
Ah, they couldn't go no higher.
They then looked up and seen the ark coming.
That they called the old man a fool about building.
They began to scream and cry.
Said, "Oh, Noah, let your ark sail, sail thisaway.
Lord, please don't let the world..."
Noah said, "No, no," said, "Remember one hundred
and twenty years ago."
Said, "Told this time would be."
Said, "Called me a fool all over the land."
But the old man kept on building for a home in the
kingdom land."*

Chorus:

*Well, you bound, bound... kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom...
Well, you bound, I'm bound... the kingdom land.*

John A. Lomax: This record was made by Norman Haskins [here pronounced "Hoskins"], assisted by a group of his friends, at the Raleigh, North Carolina, Penitentiary on December the twenty-second, 1934, for the use of the Library of Congress. The record was made through the courtesy of Warden Honeycutt of Raleigh, North Carolina.

16. RUN, SINNER, RUN (AFS 6090 B2)

Performed by the Golden Gate Quartet (Willie Johnson, baritone and lead; Henry Owens, first tenor; Clyde Riddick, second tenor; Orlandus "Dad" Wilson, bass) with Josh White (guitar).

Recorded by Alan Lomax on December 20, 1940, at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C.

"Run, Sinner, Run" is a strong jubilee performance that combines Willie Johnson's lead singing with powerful bass singing by Orlandus "Dad" Wilson. The guitar accompanist is Josh White, who is more often associated with blues and folk revival circles but whose early records often bore the credit "Joshua White, the Singing Christian." White also recorded some solo selections at this same time, but on the Coolidge Auditorium program he mainly accompanied the Golden Gates. The Gates had not yet recorded the song commercially. They would do so on March 25, 1942, calling it "Run On."

Unknown: *Thank you.*

Alan Lomax: *Uh, for the last song, if you can sit down and wait for it for about a minute, the Golden Gates. . . I want to tell you this about the Golden Gates. The bass, Orlandus Wilson, has tonsillitis, and Mr. Owen is just up three days from an appendicitis operation. So we've got to be easy on 'em. Joshua White says his eyes were burnt out. So we'll have to make it one encore tonight. And the song they've chosen to sing is "Run, Sinner, Run."*

Chorus:

Leader: *Well, you better run.*

Group: *Run when I say.*

Together: *Somebody's calling, girl. You better run.*

Group: *Run when I say.*

Together: *Somebody's calling, children.*

You better run.

Group: *Run when I say.*

Together: *Somebody's calling you. I feel like my time ain't long, long, long!*

Well, you better run.

Run when I say.

Somebody's calling, well.

You better run.

Run when I say.

Somebody's calling, children.

You better run.

Run when I say.

Somebody's calling you.

I feel like my time ain't long, long, long.

Willie Johnson:

Oh, well, Sunday when the preacher was preachin',

Well, you all was about to shout.

Well, they asked for a little collection, brother.

And you had your mouth poked out.

Well, well, well, well, well.

Hey, you better run and find you a hiding place.

Hey, John, what is the matter now?

Hmmm, good Lord!

(Chorus)

17. TAKE THIS HAMMER (AFS 745 B1)

Performed by Jimmie Strothers.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

"Take This Hammer" underscores Strothers's ties to the banjo-song tradition in the vein of Uncle Dave Macon. The song is derived from railroad or spike-driving work songs, some versions of which mention John Henry. Numerous bluegrass bands and singers like Scott McGill and Mississippi John Hurt have recorded versions of this song, nearly all of which contain verses about John Henry. This performance does not name the heroic steel driver; nevertheless, one feels his strong and valorous presence in the song.

Ain't no hammer in this mountain.

Ain't no hammer in this mountain.

Ain't no hammer in this mountain.

Ring like mine, ring like mine.

Take this hammer, and carry it to the walker.

Tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone.

This old hammer too heavy.

This old hammer too heavy.

This old hammer too heavy.

Gonna lie down, gonna lie down.

This old hammer get too heavy,

Gonna lie down, gonna lie down.

Rocks in the mountains, shine like diamonds.

Rocks in the mountains, shine like diamonds.

Rocks in the mountains, shine like diamonds.

I'm going home, I'm going home.

Everything that you see shining.

Ain't no gold, baby, ain't no gold.

Everything that you see shining.

Everything that you see shining.

Everything that you see shining.

Ain't no gold, baby, ain't no gold.

Tell little Hattie, she better be quilting.

Gonna be cold, gonna be cold.

Tell little Hattie, she better be quilting.

Gonna be cold, loving babe, gonna be cold.

Poor little Hattie keeps on writing.

Poor little Hattie keeps on writing.

Poor little Hattie keeps on writing.

I'm going home, baby, I'm going home.

If I live to see December,

I'm going home, I'm going home.

If I live to see December,

I'm going home, I'm going home.

18. **WALK DOWN, DEVILS** (AFS 729 A3)

Sung by James Wilson (lead vocal), with R. Ramsey, George Goram, R. Brown, J. Kirby, Lemuel Jones, G. Meekins, and Ed Lewis.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

James Wilson led a small group of his fellow convicts in this rendition of a track-laying song. It is set in classic antiphonal style, with much relaxed interaction between leader and chorus. This is a well-known song, current in many parts of the South, and its performance style is in the mainstream of the work-song genre. The devils of the title are the workmen themselves — the “poor devils” in the penitentiary. Wilson may also have been a member of one of the other anonymous groups recorded by John A. Lomax during this trip to the Virginia State Penitentiary.

Leader: *Hey boys, got twelve down.*

Group: *Yeah!*

Spoken: *Come on. Come on!*

Leader: *Hey boys, you got twelve dogs down.*

Group: *Yeah!*

Leader: *Take 'em up some and put 'em in a hold' pen. [hog pen?]*

Group: *Yeah!*

Leader: *Hey boys, take 'em up some and put 'em on the mule, boss.[?]*

Hey, boys, take 'em up some and put 'em in the street [?] one time, son.

Everybody get their hand on it!

Jack the rabbit, (Heh!) jack the bear. (Heh!)

Can't you line 'em up (Heh!)

Just a hair? (Heh!)

Can't you line 'em? (Heh!)

Can't you shake 'em up? (Heh!)

Can't you line 'em up (Heh!)

Just a hair? (Heh!)

*My old mistress promised me, buy me a [. .]
before she die.*

Oh, boys, can't you line 'em (Heh!)

Oh, boys, just a hair? (Heh!)

Oh, boys, can't you line 'em (Heh!)

Oh, boys, just a hair?

All around the mountain, getting so cold.

Can't hear nothing but the driver roll.

All around the mountain, (Yeah!)

Getting so cold. (Yeah!)

Can't hear nothing, (Yeah!)

Driver roll. (Yeah!)

Oh boys, can't you line 'em? (Heh!)

Oh boys, can't you line 'em? (Heh!)

Oh boys, can't you line 'em (Heh!)

Oh boys, just a hair?

Walk down, devils.

Walk down, devils.

About four rails. (Yeah!) (Repeat)

Oh boys, get your hand on it. (Yeah!)

Oh, let 'em go. (Yeah!)

Jack the rabbit, (Heh!)

Jack the bear, (Heh!)

Can't you line 'em up (Heh!)

Just a hair? (Heh!)

Can't you line 'em up? (Heh!)

Can't you shake 'em up? (Heh!)

Can't you line 'em up

Just a hair?

Spoken: *Walk down, devils.*

19. **RAILROAD WRECK** (AFS 729 A3)

Performed by Willie Williams.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

This fragment of lyric song about a train disaster is related to the complex of songs known as “In the Pines,” which was widely collected and recorded during the 1920s and 1930s. Williams’s version makes a lasting impression because it speaks of the death of his wife), and of the hobos who look like a brother and brother-in-law. The personal touches make this performance more vivid and immediate.

*Well, the train runned off 'bout a mile from town.
And it killed my wife and child.
And her head was found in the driving wheels
And her poor body's never been seen.*

*Now the railroad done completed,
and the boxcars on the tracks.*

*Here come them hobos with their knapsacks
on their backs.*

*Lord, it's one look like my brother,
and the other my brother-in-law.*

*Well, they marched all the way from Missouri to the
state of Arkansas.*

John A. Lomax: *This is another song contributed by Willie Williams at Richmond, Virginia, Sunday, May the thirty-first, 1936, for the benefit of the Library of Congress in Washington.*

20. **BITIN' SPIDER** (AFS 729 B2)

Performed by Willie Williams and a group of convicts. Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

Williams leads this impressive and affecting version of an antiphonal work song. It is a blues-drenched performance, not only in its style but in its overall ambience. The lyrics betray loneliness and deprivation, and the anguish of separation from wife and children. The song also alludes to prejudices (then overt, now tacit and rarely discussed) against dark skin-color held by many black Americans. Bitin' Spider, Trotting Liza, and Hiking Jerry are names of trains.

*Oh, Bitin' Spider, where did you leave Trotting Liza?
Oh, Bitin' Spider, where did you leave Trotting Liza?
In Birmingham, buddy, Lord, Lord, in Birmingham.*

*Well, I seen her, seen her when she left the mountain,
Oh, Lord, I seen her, seen her when she left
the mountain,
Oh, she didn't stop, buddy, Lord, Lord, she didn't stop.*

*Old Hikin' Jerry, hikin' down the mainline Southern,
Oh, Hikin' Jerry, hikin' down the mainline Southern,*

Oh, dead on time, buddy, Lord, Lord, dead on time.

Didn't stop here, Lord, to get no coal, neither water,
Didn't stop here, Lord, to get no coal, neither water.
She kept on by, buddy, Lord, Lord, kept on by.

I don't want no coal-black woman for my regular,
I don't want no coal-black woman for my regular.
Too low down, buddy, Lord, Lord, too low down.

I don't want no peas, cornbread, and molasses,
I don't want no peas, cornbread, and molasses.
It hurts my side, buddy, Lord, Lord, it hurt my side.

I'm going back to, back to the [...] tunnel,
I'm going back, buddy, back to the [...] tunnel.
Lord, that's my home, buddy, Lord, Lord,
that's my home.

Every mail day, every mail day I gets a letter,
Every mail day, every mail day I gets a letter,
Crying, "Son, come home, buddy, Lord, Lord, son,
come home."
I didn't have no, have no ready-made money,
I don't have no, have no ready-made money.
Lord, I couldn't go home, buddy, Lord, Lord, I couldn't
go home.

I've got a woman, two little children on the mountain,
I got a woman, two little children on the mountain.
Cried all night long, buddy, Lord, Lord, all night long.

John A. Lomax: This beautiful work song of the levee
camps was led by Willie Williams and a group of his

friends at Richmond, Virginia, May the thirty-first,
1936, and was sung for the benefit of the Library of
Congress in Washington through the courtesy of
Captain Euell.

21. JOHN HENRY (AFS 6503 A1)

Performed by Sonny Terry (vocal and harmonica) and
Brownie McGhee (guitar).
Recorded by Alan Lomax in May 1942 at the Library of
Congress, Washington, D.C.

Sonny Terry's inimitable harmonica playing was heard
earlier in "Fox Chase" (track 9). This second selection
further underscores his proficiency in the way he pars-
es the verses of the ballad in blues style, making it
fresh and exciting. The guitar accompaniment by
Brownie McGhee provides an elegant foil to Terry's
falsetto singing. Notice the intricate interplay between
the harmonica and the voice, and the way that Terry
uses his instrument to complete the sung line.

John Henry told his—
Boy, you'd better—
If I miss this steel, Lord—
Yes, must be your burying—
Yes, must—
Be your—
Buryin'— (Repeat last 3 lines)
Yes, must—
John Henry had a little—
Name was Polly—
John Henry got sick and—
Oh, Polly drove steel like a—
Oh, Polly drove steel like a—

Hey, John Henry told his —
Roll him in the—
The last word I heard John—
He said, "A man ain't nothing but a—
Man, ain't nothing but a—."

22. TIN CAN ALLEY (AFS 726 B2)

Performed by Ezra Lewis.
Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the
State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

This exciting performance by Lewis is his sole recorded
contribution. "Tin Can Alley" is a solo vocal that implies
not only a familiarity with the blues tradition but also with
the then-hot trend in scat singing, relatively new to
records at the time. Vocalists as diverse as Cab Calloway,
the Mills Brothers, and the Norfolk Jazz Quartet all prac-
ticed this manner of singing nonsense syllables in place
of words, which was carried to its highest art form by
jazz performers such as Sarah Vaughan and Ella
Fitzgerald. "Tin Can Alley" is a wonderful mixture of the
sentiments of mistreatment and uncertainty about the
future so often expressed by blues singers.

I was down in Tin Can Alley, had my jug, jug, jug
all loaded down.
And the police came and got me, and they carried me,
me and my jug on down.

I hollered, "Ve ve ve le vo, ve le ve ve ve le vo le ve
le vo."
And I don't know what's gonna become of,
and I don't know what's gonna become of,
Gone 'come of me.

And the bar, bar, bars all 'round me, and bar, bar, bars
all 'round, all 'round poor me.
And the bar, bar, bars all 'round me, and the bar, bar,
bars don't bo— don't bother me.

I hollered "Ve ve ve le vo, ve le ve ve ve le vo le ve
le vo."
And I fell down on my knees; I said, "Lord, Lord, Lord,
have mercy, if You please."

John A. Lomax: This song was song by Ezra Lewis,
Richmond, Virginia, May the fifth, May the thirty-first,
1936, for the benefit of the Library of Congress,
through the courtesy of Major Euell.

23. PICK 'EM UP (AFS 861 B2)

Performed by Albert Shepherd and a group of convicts.
Recorded by John A. Lomax on July 18, 1936, at the
State Prison Camp, Boone, North Carolina.

Several factors make for a singular performance
of yet another work song for the laying and lining
of track. One unusual trait is a twin lead vocal
alternating between unison and loose harmony
singing. The lead singing is surprisingly tender in
tone and is pitched higher than most of the other
voices heard on this CD. Each line is strongly
punctuated at the end.

Pick 'em up, pick 'em up. (Yeah!)
Let 'em fall down. (Yeah!)
Hard rocky bottom,
Oh, Lord, got to be found. (Yeah!)
Lula! (Yeah!)

Lula! (Yeah!)

Lula, Lula, what have, oh, Lord, have I done (Yeah!)

To make you roll (Yeah!)

Your eyes, (Yeah!)

Great big eyes at me? (Yeah!)

Do like I told you, told you, and let's live right. (Yeah!)

Do like I told you, oh, Lord, let's live right. (Yeah!)

Lord, you know? (Yeah!)

You the cause, oh Lord, poor me here! (Yeah!)

Lula went to Mobile, to Mobile. I told her not to go. (Yeah!)

Now she's got to sleep on,

Sleep on the cold iron floor. (Yeah!)

Mamie, (Yeah!)

Mamie, (Yeah!)

Mamie, what have, oh, Lord, have I done (Yeah!)

To make you roll (Yeah!)

Your eyes, great big eyes at me?

24. PRISON BLUES (AFS 270 A2)

Performed by Robert Higgins.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax on December 22, 1934, at the State Penitentiary, Raleigh, North Carolina.

This very bluesy selection was recorded during a very brief trip to central North Carolina just days before John A. Lomax introduced Leadbelly to the wider world in New York City. Although it is impossible to know for sure, Higgins sounds like a relatively young man. He seems to have been full of remorse for the trouble that he has caused and to understand — in hindsight — the wisdom of his mother and of his religious training. His sentimental text is an unusual combination of sacred

and secular lyrics, exceptional as well for its mixture of vernacular black speech and old English. Higgins's vocal style is relatively unadorned. He delivers this sorrowful song in a fairly strict duple meter, utilizing a four-note scale sung within the range of an octave. This text is printed as "Prison Moan" in *Our Singing Country* (pp. 361–62).

*If I had a-listened what my mother said,
I woulda been home sleeping in my cold iron bed.*

*By being hardheaded, and I would not mind.
Yes, the cause o' me having all this time.*

*But if I overcome this trouble I'm in.
Lord, I never no more will live in sin.*

*When I was a free man, I had plenty friends.
Now I'm in trouble, and they won't come in.*

*Lord, it's Father, I stretch my hand to Thee,
No other, no other help I know.*

*But if Thou withdrew Thyself from me,
Oh, whither, Lord, whither shall I go?*

*Lord, if I could hear my dear old mother
When she pray for me once again.*

*Trouble have caused me to weep,
and it caused me to moan,
And it caused me to leave my happy home.*

John A. Lomax: . . . has been sung by Robert Higgins

on December the twenty-second, 1934, at the North Carolina State Prison at Raleigh, North Carolina, through the courtesy of Warden Honeycutt for the use of the Library of Congress in Washington.

25. EVERY MAIL DAY (AFS 787 B2)

Performed by J. Kirby and a group of five of his fellow convicts.

Recorded by John A. Lomax on May 31, 1936, at the State Penitentiary, Richmond, Virginia.

Kirby leads his group in an improvised, loosely constructed work song. The men are yearning for mail from the outside and the sense of freedom that letters and newspapers convey. The mail not only brought news of family members but ignited dreams of limitless travel: "I'm going back to East Colorado, that's my home" — a natural response to the emotional and material privations the inmates experienced.

Leader and Chorus:

*Every mail day, mail day, I get a letter,
Every mail day, mail day, I get a letter,
Every mail day, mail day, I gets a letter.
"Son, come home, Lordy, Lord, son, come home."*

*I didn't have no, have no ready-made money.
I didn't have no, have no ready-made money.
I didn't have no, have no ready-made money,
I couldn't go home, Lordy, Lord, I couldn't go home.*

*I'm gonna roll here, roll here a few days longer.
I'm going roll here, roll here a few days longer.
I'm gonna roll here, roll here a few days longer.*

And I'm going home, Lordy, Lord, and I'm going home.

*Yes, I'm going, going back to East Colorado.
Yes, I'm going, going back to East Colorado.
Yes, I'm going, going back to East Colorado.
That's my home, Lordy, Lord, that's my home.*

*Lord, I'm going where they pay seven and a quarter,
Yes, I'm going where they pay seven and a quarter.
Yes, I'm going where they pay seven and a quarter,
My Sunday board, Lord, and my Sunday board.*

John A. Lomax: *This song was led by Jay Kirby, accompanied by five of his companions, at Richmond, Virginia on May the 30th, nineteen hundred and thirty-six, and was sung through the courtesy of Captain Fitzgerald and Captain Euell, for the benefit of the Library of Congress in Washington.*

26. WHEN I LIE DOWN LAST NIGHT (AFS 268 B1)

Performed by Blind Joe, vocal and guitar.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax on December 19, 1934, at the State Penitentiary, Raleigh, North Carolina.

"When I Lie Down Last Night" is a magnificent song about wanderlust, one of the few blues in this compilation. Blind Joe is an exceptional artist, clearly influenced by Blind Blake, a Paramount recording artist originally from Florida who recorded a wide selection of blues, rags, and other secular songs between 1926 and 1932. Blind Joe's guitar work and singing place him

squarely in the camp of Piedmont blues artists. "When I Lied Down Last Night" is among the strongest (and, unfortunately, the briefest) performances in this regional style of blues.

*When I lie down last night,
I heard a train whistle blow.
When I lie down last night,
I heard a train whistle blow.
Every time I hear a train whistle blow,
makes me want to go.*

*Well, I woke up this morning
with traveling on my mind.
I woke up this morning, baby,
with traveling on my mind.
Thought about I was leaving my baby,
couldn't hardly keep from crying.*

*Oh, come here, pretty mama,
sit down on your daddy's knee.
Oh, come here, pretty mama,
sit down on your daddy's knee.
Can't you tell me something, give my poor heart ease?*

*I only got one dollar, baby, let's use it 'til I arise.
I only got one dollar, baby, so let's use it 'til I arise.
Come and get it, pretty mama,
before this poor boy dies.*

Blind Joe: This song was composed by Blind Joe, Raleigh State Penitentiary, December the nineteenth, 19...

27. WORRIED BLUES (AFS 6502 B2)

Sung by Sonny Terry.

Recorded by Alan Lomax in May 1942, at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

This final "lowdown" blues by Sonny Terry is about a woman with a heart "like a piece of railroad steel." Terry handles the blues structure rather informally here, and performs with his usual verve. His falsetto vocal helps to obscure and mitigate the violent sentiments that permeate this song.

*I'm worried now, woman, and I won't be worried long.
Say, I'm worried, baby, and I won't be worried long.
Say, I'm gonna get me a forty-five, oh, gonna make
you leave home.*

*Say, my mama told me, ooh, when I was a child,
She told me, ohh, when I was a child.
She said, "Sonny Terry, you too big a devil, ooh,
to be so foolish and wild."
Yeah, . . . ooh . . . yeah.*

*Yeah, my woman got a heart like a piece of
railroad steel.*

*Say, my woman got a heart like a piece of
railroad steel.*

*Said, she passed me this morning, she didn't say,
"Son, how you feel?"*

28. GOING TO RICHMOND (AFS 749 B)

Performed by Jimmie Strothers.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke on June 14, 1936, at the State Farm, Lynn, Virginia.

Not to be pigeonholed as old-fashioned, Strothers demonstrates that he has a strong feeling for the blues in "Going to Richmond." This is almost a proto-blues in its form and its use of free association, and it contains some lovely, imaginative imagery. The song is made more interesting by its reference to Richmond, which Strothers implies (sardonically, perhaps) is only a short distance from Paradise — without saying exactly how the singer will find his way there.

[Humming]

*Yes, I'm going to Richmond, baby,
from there to Paradise.
Gonna see that woman, that sure, God,
wrecked my life.
Yes, I'm going to Richmond,
and I'm leaving for Paradise.
Gonna see that woman, that sure, God,
wrecked my life.*

*Yes, I'm leaving old Paris,
and I'm headed for Tennessee.
Gonna see that brownskin,
that sure made a fool of me.
Yes, I'm leaving Paris, babe,
I'm headed for Tennessee.
Gonna see that, fair brown,
that sure made a fool of me.*

*Yes, the old folks teach it,
and I believe to my soul it's so, poor boy.
Son, don't you trust no young woman nowhere on
earth you go.
Yes, the old folks teach it and I believe my soul it's so.
Son, don't you trust no young woman nowhere on
earth you go.*

*Yes, your fair brown will tell you,
that she love you all her life, poor boy.
Met another dude around the corner and really tell
that same lie twice.
Yes, your fair brown will tell you that she love you
all her life.
Meet another dude around the corner and really tell
that same lie twice.*

*I declare, the women I sure, God, do despise.
Got a handful of "gimme" and a mouthful of
"much obliged."
Well, I declare, the women I sure, God, do despise.
Got a handful of "gimme" and a mouthful of
"much obliged."*

*I got one old bulldog and a very long-legged hound,
I got one high yellow and two or three browns.
I got one high yellow and two or three browns.
I got one high yellow really and two or three browns.*

*Train coming around the mountain,
this morning in a solid moan.
If I live to see tomorrow,
gonna roll in my fair brown's arms.
Train coming 'round the mountain in a solid moan.*

The southern Piedmont stretches from eastern Alabama through northern Virginia. Since the mid-eighteenth century it has been an agricultural region, its landscape dominated by such varied labor-intensive crops as peaches, tobacco, cotton, and apples. Prior to the Civil War, many black Americans were brought — mostly as slaves — to this gently rolling section of the South to work in its fields and orchards. As late as the 1970s, nearly all of the Piedmont counties had African-American populations of more than 30 percent, and several have populations in excess of 70 percent. The region remains largely rural to this day, although metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Charlotte, and Richmond are growing rapidly. With its rolling hills and fields between the mountains to the west and Atlantic Ocean to the east, this ecologically distinctive area was the setting for a cultural cross-fertilization that helped to shape the South.

Unlike the vast cotton-producing plantations found in the fecund lowlands along the Mississippi River, Piedmont farms were generally small, and resident black and white farmers tended to experience similar economic struggles. A typical example is the small rural community of Cedar Grove, located in central North Carolina near Durham, about twenty miles from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. According to the 1940 census, Cedar Grove had 1,753 black citizens

and 1,671 white citizens, most of them heavily involved in agriculture, all but 91 of the inhabitants being classified as part of the rural farm population. The census noted 239 black-operated farms and 267 white-operated farms, most of them run by tenant farmers earning roughly similar per capita incomes from their sharecropping efforts, regardless of race. The only place where blacks were legally barred in this Orange County hamlet was the segregated school.

Music-making in Cedar Grove reflected this relative economic parity. Blacks and whites might cooperate in helping each other with farmwork and harvesting, as well as in music-making. Much secular music centered around small two- or three-piece string bands, which often played at house parties that moved from house to house during the quieter, cooler months, when the demands of farmwork (often related to the tobacco industry) were reduced. These small bands performed a repertoire of tunes common to blacks and whites. Dancing, eating, and camaraderie often characterized these events.²

It would be a mistake to paint a rosy picture of race relations in the Piedmont, its relatively easy racial interaction notwithstanding. Nevertheless, conditions here contrasted strongly with those elsewhere in the Deep South, particularly in the Mississippi Delta. Cultural exchange in the southern Piedmont allowed the development of a vernacular music that shared characteris-

tics from both black and white cultures. Elements of both secular and sacred repertoires reflected this interaction; for example, in the realm of string band music and in the performance of late-nineteenth-century songs like "Old Dan Tucker" and "John Henry" (tracks 1 and 21 on this CD).

Virginia, at the northern end of the Piedmont, was a rich source of the black sacred and secular music that John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax recorded for the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress from 1934 to 1942. Of these recordings, the majority heard on this compact disc were made during May 1936 and June 1936 field trips to central Virginia by John A. Lomax — specifically, to the State Penitentiary in Richmond and the State Farm in nearby Lynn. A handful of other tracks were recorded by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax at the State Penitentiary in Raleigh, North Carolina, between December 18 and 22, 1934. Alan Lomax recorded Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee in Washington, D.C., in May 1942, and the Golden Gate Quartet at the Library of Congress, at a concert held at the Coolidge Auditorium on December 20, 1940. In their longer-term quest to document the folk music of the South from Texas to Virginia, the Lomaxes worked a great deal in the segregated prisons, where they believed the oldest types of African-American songs might have survived, possibly carried over from the era of slavery. They recorded the singing of hundreds of inmates, contributing such now-celebrated songs as "The Midnight Special" to our musical patrimony, and located wonderful but still-obscure performers such as James "Ironhead" Baker, and artists like Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, who later attained worldwide renown.

Alan Lomax accompanied his father on the Raleigh, North Carolina, trip in 1934; during the Virginia field trips he was apparently busy with other projects, which included working with Leadbelly. Harold Spivacke, an acquaintance and a classical music buff, and later chief of the music division of the Library of Congress, accompanied John A. Lomax to the State Farm in Lynn, Virginia. Lomax and Spivacke hopped into a car for the four-hour, hundred-mile drive south on Route 1. For Spivacke it was an eye-opening experience. He had gone with Lomax out of friendship and a general interest in music. Later, he admitted that "I had never heard any of this sort of [folk song] stuff, and I fell in love with it." It was not only the music and the culture that cast a spell over Spivacke; he also became fascinated with Lomax himself. In contrast to the practiced and adept Mr. Lomax, Spivacke had never previously visited a prison and generally seems to have been unfamiliar with dealing with such blue-collar issues as pumping gasoline and dealing directly with a bootlegger. In Nolan Porterfield's account,

Spivacke was even more impressed when he saw how Lomax handled the recording session at the prison farm. They arrived to find the warden and his family on the veranda, while on the lawn before them was a black quartet which broke into song the minute they appeared. On the steps sat a black prisoner plucking a banjo. "This is trouble," Lomax said, sotto voce, and only later Spivacke realized the problem: the warden's quartet was terrible. He watched with growing admiration as Lomax set about getting rid of them without offending the warden. That took an hour or so. Then Lomax sat down on the steps with the blind banjo play-

¹ Kip Lornell (Departments of Africana Studies, American Civilization, and Music at George Washington University, Washington, D.C.), is the co-author (with Charles Wolfe) of *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* and five other books about American music.

² Kip Lornell's "Banjo and Blues," in *Arts in Earnest. North Carolina Folklife*, edited by Daniel Patterson and Charles G. Zug (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) describes the Cedar Grove community in greater detail.



Community Husking Bee

Photo used by permission of Hampton University Museum, Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia

CREDITS :

Original field recordings produced and recorded between 1934 and 1942
by John A. Lomax, Alan Lomax, and Harold Spivacke.

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Special Thanks:

Joe Brescio, Judith Gray, Elliot Hoffman, Jay Sylvester,
and Hunter College of the City University of New York

The compilation of this series was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Every effort has been made to make these historic recordings sound as good as they did
when John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax made them in the field.

All transfers were made, whenever possible, from the original source materials using
the Prism 20-bit A-to-D converters and the Prism 20-bit Noise Shaping System.

Remastered to 20-bit digital from the original metal and acetate field recordings.

These unique historic discs contain imperfections and surface noise typical of the technology of their era.