"I was born at Port Gibson, Mississippi...December 26th, 1902."

With these words J.D. Short began to tell his story to Sam Charters, who interviewed and recorded Short in July, 1962, at J.D.'s home on Cole Street in St. Louis. Only a few weeks later Short died from a serious circulatory ailment, which had afflicted him since receiving an injury during army service.

J.D. Short, like Mercy Dee and Barrelhouse Buck, died before the establishment of the blues circuit which, over the past ten years or so, has enabled white audiences in America, Europe and elsewhere to see many fine blues artists rescued from ill-deserved obscurity. Short came to the attention of record producer Bob Koester in 1955, when Bob was still editing Jazz Report, and struggling to get his new Delmar label off the ground. They met through J.D.'s cousin, Big Joe Williams, who a few days earlier had visited Bob's St. Louis record shop to audition for Delmar. In those days, Joe and J.D. worked the local taverns together when Joe was in town. (J.D. also had a one-man band rig - rack harmonica, guitar, bass drum and foot cymbal - for solo dates). A rehearsal session was held at J.D.'s home, with J.D. playing second guitar and harmonica. He also contributed a couple of vocals, and one of these, his version of J.T. Smith's "Howling Wolf Blues", led to an unfortunate misunderstanding.

Koester knew Short as a legendary recording artist who had made a handful of extremely rare and musically individual recordings for Paramount and Vocalion during the Depression. Bob's sleeve note to Delmar DL-602 shows that J.D. had helped enhance the aura of mystery placed around him by his ability to reproduce the recorded repertoire of J.T. "Funny Papa" Smith. Although he had reservations about whether Short and Smith were the same men (aurally there was never any real evidence for this), Bob made the assumption in his notes to DL-602, retracting it in those to DL-609. Possibly J.D. met Smith or spent some time in East Texas, as Bob suggests, but the explanation may simply be that he liked the blues of Funny Papa Smith and Texas Alexander, and learned them from the artists' records, which sold widely in the South.

J.D. had been in St. Louis for nearly 35 years when he recorded for Delmar, but his musical roots were in the Mississippi Delta country where he was raised. He was born on a plantation near Port Gibson ("right up the hill from the old brick kiln" as he told Koester), a small town in Claiborne County on Highway 61, thirty miles south of Vicksburg. (A photograph of Port Gibson's Presbyterian church steeple, which terminates in a hand pointing to the sky, appears on page 113 of Frederic Ramsey's book, 'Been Here And Gone'.)

When J.D. was six, his family moved nearly a hundred miles north up Highway 61 to Hollandale, a small Delta town south-east of Greenville. It was here that he heard the blues for the first time, songs like "East St. Louis Blues" and "Make Me Down A Pallet On The Floor", and the unaccompanied hollers of workers in the fields. There was a local guitarist named Willie Johnson from whom J.D. picked up the rudiments of blues guitar, although at the time he was more interested in mastering the harmonica.

Around 1910 Charley Patton visited J.D.'s father's cabin at "Little Merty Bow" (probably Murphy, a few miles east of Hollandale near the Sunflower River), and played his guitar. Patton obviously used a bottleneck on this occasion, as J.D. could recall him making the guitar 'say', "Lord have mercy,save poor me", a technique which Patton employed in his two-part "Prayer Of Death" recording. Charley was apparently playing at a nearby log camp at the time.

In 1912 the Short family moved north from Washington County along Highway 61 and settled in Clarksdale, where J.D. lived for the next eleven years. It was here that he completed his musical education, developing his own guitar style and learning how to play guitar and harmonica together. In 1919 he learned blues piano from Son Harris in Sholes (not on my map, but presumably located somewhere in Coahoma County). He never recorded on this instrument, unfortunately.

Amongst the guitarists Short encountered between 1912 and 1923 were Willie Ebzen, Red Willie (from Shelby, Mississippi), Marty Bishop ("a great guitar player. He got killed before I left from down there.") and "Coot", who used to play the "Red River Blues". He also mentions a Willie Dobson, who might possibly have been Red Willie. Clarksdale was already the blues centre for the Northern half of the Delta, and one
can imagine J.D. playing his guitar and picking harp on the streets, just as Howlin' Wolf was to do a few years later.

At the age of 20, J.D. headed North, arriving in St. Louis on April 16th, 1925. In the twenties St. Louis was pulsing with intense musical activity, and there was a thriving blues community. J.D. worked days at a brass foundry, playing clubs and parties in the evenings and at weekends.

In the late twenties quite a number of St. Louis based artists got onto record — Henry Brown, Edith Johnson, Roosevelt Sykes, Teddy Darby, Mary Johnson and Henry Townsend, to name but six — and J.D.'s turn came in 1930, when he secured a date for the premier country-blues label, Paramount. The session was held on or about 1st June in Grafton, Wisconsin, and at least six sides were recorded. Of the three known 78s, one has been reissued (Paramount 13043 on Origin OJL-11, 'The Mississippi Blues No.2 - The Delta'), and at least one of the other two has not been recovered. After a thousand issues, many of which had been very successful, Paramount's blues series rapidly went into a sales decline during the Depression year of 1930, and by the time J.D.'s records came out the following year, Paramount were only pressing a thousand or less of each release. Many of the Paramount 13000 series are extremely rare or no longer exist.

"Drafted Mama" and "Wake Up Bright Eye Mama" (Paramount 13040, same number used earlier for a Charlie Patton issue), like "Flaggin' It To Georgia" and "Tar Road Blues" (Paramount 13091), are only titles in the Paramount catalogue, but fortunately 13043 is available to all. (Possibly "Flaggin' It To Georgia" may have some connection with the fact that J.D.'s grandmother lived in Atlanta, Georgia, during slavery time. She apparently composed a number of spirituals. Possibly J.D. still had some relatives in Georgia in 1930.)

J.D.'s references to the denizens of the swampland in "Lonesome Swamp Rattlesnake" imbue his blues with a quality of mystery appropriate to the bayous and cypress groves of the Mississippi valley. The snake, whether it be the "Crawlin' King Snake", Blind Lemon's "Black Snake" or Shorty's "Lonesome Swamp Rattlesnake", does, of course, have great significance as a phallic symbol in the blues, but it also has superstitious associations deriving from the snake myths which were legion amongst country negroes. J.D.'s song has an eerie feeling about it; "Way lonesome, out in some swamp I know," sings J.D., and then proceeds to build up a fantasy in which his woman is besieged by rattlesnakes (with both human and reptile attributes) which crawled around his door and up to his bed.

'Way lonesome, out in some swamp I know (x2).
Well, the lonesome rattlesnake just crept up to my door.
You ought to heard my baby hollering, "Daddy, won't you come home?"
Heard my baby hollering, "Daddy won't you come home?"

"Better be on your way, the rattlesnake's got to take your home."
That's all right, baby, I won't leave you here no more (x2),
For that creeping rattlesnake done crawled up to my door.

Walking 'long and ain't doing a thing (x2),
I met a rattlesnake, oh, baby, at last,
I can't travel, honey, night and day (x2),
Lord, these rattlesnakes travelling won't let me get away.
Crawling rattlesnake crawled around my bed (x2),
And it loved my woman, and, man, it done fell dead.
I love my baby, and I know for sure (x2),
But these creeping rattlesnakes done crawled up to my door.
Gonna sing this song, and I ain't gon' sing no more (x2),
For that creeping rattlesnake done crawled up to my door.
Have you ever been lonely, honey and feel so blue? (x2)
When the rattlesnake crawl, there ain't nobody can tell you what to do.

The reverse of 13043, "Telephone Argin' Blues", may have developed from an actual incident, J.D. trying to 'phone back home to St. Louis from Grafton and having trouble with busy lines and crossed wires. The line in verse 1, if correctly transcribed, is especially strange and striking.

There's so many people arguing on the telegram (x2),
(This thought heve run through my head just a stone in sand.)
Early this morning trying to get a news through,
Early this morning trying to get a news over the line,
Lord, I just want to talk to that teasing faro of mine.

Hello, Central, please give me five-o-nine (x2),
I just want to talk to that old time gal of mine.

Hey, arguing, arguing everywhere,
And they arguing, arguing everywhere,
I can't get no message over the phone nowhere I go.

Mmmmm, baby, when can I speak to you? (x2)
If you don't stop for me soon, baby, I don't know what I'm going to do.
I picked up the receiver, I could not get a word,
I picked up the receiver, I could not get no word,
I want to talk to my home from this sad news I heard.

I'm asking you a question, mama, asking you very clear (x2),
And if all things true, man, I'm gonna leave on the (li-yun here).
Mmmmm, ain't seen my baby in six long months today,
I ain't seen my baby six long months today.

Some woman (love) I used to have done seen my babe some day.

The guitar accompaniments to both pieces provide powerful rhythmic support to J.D.'s intense vocals (at times he sounds to be slapping the strings rather like Patton), but there is little melodic variation. There is a cough at the end of "Rattlesnake", but by mid-1930 Paramount weren't bothering to make second takes.

On March 14th, 1932, J.D. was again in a recording studio, this time in New York City. A group of St. Louis artists were in the "Big Apple" to record for Vocalion (ARC had not yet opened their Chicago studios) - Charley Jordan, Peetie Wheatstraw, J.D. Short and Hi Henry Brown. (Lonnie Johnson was also in town, recording for Columbia on the 17th.) Charley, who may have organised the session (he was at that time a record company talent scout as well as a blues artists), recorded first, cutting four sides with Peetie on piano (masters 11470, 71, 72 and 73). J.D. then recorded two solo sides (11474 and 75). Next came Hi Henry Brown's justly celebrated "Titanic Blues" and "Preacher Blues" (11476 and 77), with Jordan playing second guitar. Of the remaining two sides by J.D. (11478 and 79), "Let Me Nash That Thing" apparently features piano accompaniment by Peetie Wheatstraw. (I haven't heard this recording), while "Grand Daddy Blues" is a solo vocal and guitar effort.

Both of J.D.'s Vocalion 78s were issued as by 'Jelly Jaw Short', a nickname he acquired because of a nervous affliction which caused his jaw to tremble when he sang. (At least, this is the explanation given in the notes to DL-609). Sam Charters attributes it to J.D.'s "unique vibrato". 25 years after the Vocalion session, when Big Joe and J.D. were recording for Delmar, Joe several times referred to J.D. as 'Jelly Joe'.

The lyrics of "Snake Doctor Blues" (Vocalion 1704) are based on the country superstition that the large swamp dragon-fly is a 'snake doctor', alighting on injured snakes and bringing them back to life. The song also has phallic overtones and voodoo references. The snake deity is central to voodoo worship, and the hoodoo doctor keeps a snake in a box. The oldtime conjure doctors used to go into the swamps to gather their own herbs and roots, such as the well known John The Conqueror and Wonder Of The World Root. The use of the 'crooks' mentioned in verse 4 of this fascinating blues is obscure, but perhaps refers to hooking and catching snakes.

It is unfortunate that only one take was made, as J.D. gets confused at the beginning of verse 5, and garbles what would otherwise be a line of rare quality, comparable to Willie McTell's beautiful "Big star falling, mama, 'tain't long fo' day". In fairness to J.D., I give here the correct version of the line, before transcribing the actual recording: "The evening star might rise and the midnight wind might blow."

**SPOKEN**: I'm a snake doctor man, everybody's trying to find out my name.

I fly by easy but I fly in low, low distant land.

I'm a snake doctor man, everybody's trying to find out my name (x2),
And when I fly by easy, name, I'm gonna fly in low, low distant lands.

I'm a snake doctor man, gang of womens everywhere I go,
I'm a snake doctor man, gathers a gang of womens everywhere I go,
And when I get to flying sometime, I can see a gang of woman standing out in the...
I'm goin' fly by easy, man and you know I ain't gonna fly very low (x2),
When I got a little jinx in my pack, man, don't nobody know.
I got many crooks in my bag and the dyingest snake can crawl (x2),
I puts up a solid foundation mens, and you know it don't never fall.
The evening star might blow (sic) and the midnight wind might rise,
The evening star might rise and the midnight star (sic) might blow,
And when I put up a solid foundation I don't have to look for that woman no more.
I'm a snake doctor man, got my medicine I say in my bag (x2),
I mean to be a real snake doctor man, you know I don't mean to be no fag.
Lord, I know many of you mens are wondering what the snake doctor man got in his hands (x2),
He got roots and herbs, steal a woman, man everywhere he lands.

"Snake Doctor" and its reverse, "Barefoot Blues", are melodically very similar, but
J.D.'s powerful singing and potent guitar rhythms, and the different lyric content,
make them quite distinct performances. His guitar playing here parallels that of
Henry Townsend, although their styles are by no means identical. J.D. does not use
the distinctive treble string snap that characterizes Henry's performances, but has
his own guitar vibrato, created by pulling the strings while "flailing with his
whole hand".

"Barefoot Blues" is a mean mistreater blues, and one of the best of the genre:

SPoken: Now mame let's get stomped out and get drunk and run.
"Cos I'm a hard workin' man, you think I'm gonna be a slave for you all
my life.
And you know the reason, you don't know how to treat a good man right.
Now let's get stomped out sweet mama and get drunk and run (x2),
I don't feel like ballin' with you mama, but I just feel like havin' my fun.
Now if you have a long ways to travel, long ways from your home (x2),
Baby (use) all my money for whiskey and gettin' drunk, mama you don't know how
you carry on.
I worked hard daily, daily, mama, trying to make a good home for you,
I worked hard daily, daily, trying to make a good home, home for you,
Lord you do things to your good man, mama to make him feel so blue.
In a few more days now mama, your good man gonna be goin' away (x2),
You gonna miss that hard workin' man, you gonna need his help someday.
I work hard daily, daily, bring you home my pay,
I work hard now daily, woman, bring you home my pay,
I can't see how you have the nerve mama (to) treat a good man this-a-way.
Lord I'll believe I'll go mama, don't feel welcome here,
Now I believe I'll go mama, Lord I don't feel welcome here,
You a no-good woman, you don't feel no hard-working man's care.

Spiders, like snakes, occur frequently in country blues symbolism. Peetie Wheatstraw
recorded his "King Spider Blues" for Decca in 1935; Robert Lockwood made a "Black
Spider Blues" for Bluebird in 1941; and one of Muddy Waters' early recordings was
about a "Neon Red Spider". There are many other examples, and verses such as "Spider,
spider, crawlin' up the wall, He going up there just to get his ashes hauled" are
well known. One prerecording artist even dubbed himself Black Spider Lumplin'.
In Short's "Grand Daddy Blues" (Vocalion 1708) the 'grand daddy' spider is an object
of bad luck onto which he projects his loneliness and desolation. (At no time during
the song does J.D. actually use the word 'spider', but it seems likely that this is
what he refers to; although it should be noted that daddy-long-legs (crane flies)
are also known as grand-daddies in the South, and it may be that Short was referring
to this insect, and not to a spider, although the use of the word 'crawl' would be
more appropriate to the latter than the former. See page 341 of the paperback edition
of Zora Neale Hurston's "Mules And Men" for a root doctor's prescription that
includes mashed-up 'grand-daddies'.

Now please Mister Grand-daddy, don't crawl up and down my wall (x2),
You will soon put me in bad luck and I won't have no woman at all.
It was early this morning, I was lying down on my floor (x2),
I was keeping diddy-watch on my wall so that grand-daddy won't crawl in my house
no more.

If that grand-daddy crawls, boy you soon be in my shape some old day (x2),
You won't have no true lovin' woman for to pass your troubles away.
When you get bad luck in your home, there's a few men know just how it feels.

It takes a real good woman for to satisfy him who won't (....).
I get weak and lonesome sometimes in a dark room by myself (x2),
The reason I feel that way, mama, ain't got nobody to feel my care.

There is an instrumental introduction, and a guitar chorus after verse 3, thereby reducing the usual six or seven verses to five.

Although Charley and Peetie recorded again on March 15th, and Henry and Peetie on the 17th, there were no further recordings by Short. (It was at this session that Peetie accompanied himself on guitar on all four sides he cut.) J.D.'s third and final pre-war recording session came just over a year later, when he took part in a mammoth, day-long session, held in Chicago by Victor to provide material for their newly launched Bluebird label.

On August 2nd, 1933, a group of St. Louis-based artists, amongst them Walter Davis, the Sparks Brothers, Charlie McFadden, J.D. Short, James "Stump" Johnson, St. Louis Jimmy and Roosevelt Sykes, were in Chicago to record for Bluebird. Matrices 76835 and 36 were by a female singer named Georgia Boyd, presumably also from St. Louis. On one title she was accompanied by Roosevelt Sykes on piano, on the other, "Never Mind Blues", by J.D. Short on guitar. His accompaniment to Miss Boyd is rather more mellow and melodic than the accompaniments to his own vocals.

J.D. made two solo sides (matrices 76837 and 38), which were issued on Bluebird B-5169 under the pseudonym Joe Stone. (It is interesting that Big Joe Williams referred to Short as Jelly Joe during the Delmar sessions. Possibly Joe was actually Short's first name. Big Joe could possibly shed some light on this.) "It's Hard Time" is described in the sleeve note to Yazoo L-1003 (on which it is reissued) as "perhaps the greatest blues song that takes the Depression as its theme", an assessment with which I would largely agree (although there are plenty of other candidates for the title, e.g. The Mississippi Sheiks' "Times Done Got Hard" and Big Joe Williams' "Providence Help The Poor People".)

And it's hard time here, hard time everywhere (x2),
And it's hard time here, baby, it's hard time everywhere.
I went down to the factory where I worked for years,
I went down to the factory, worked for years (before),
And the bossman told me, "Man, I ain't hiring here (no more).
Now we have a little city, call down in Hooversville,
And we have a little city, call down in Hooversville,
Times done got so hard, people ain't got no place (to live). Don't the moon lock pretty, shining down through the trees (x2),
I can see my fair brown, swear to God and she can't see me.
Sun rose this morning I was lyin' down on my floor,
Sun rose this morning, lyin' down on my floor,
Lord I ain't had no teasin' faro, baby, I ain't got no place to go.
I'm gonna sing this song, babe, I ain't gonna sing no more (x2),
'Cos my baby keep on callin', baby and I believe I had better go.
And I hate to hear my faro call my name (x2),
She don't call so lonesome but she call so nice and plain.

("Hooversvilles" were shanty towns that sprang up on the outskirts of cities during the worst of the Depression.) This blues is performed at a much faster tempo than J.D.'s Paramount and Vocalion sides, and has rapid-fire guitar work, spotlighted in the instrumental introduction and the guitar break between verses 6 and 7. Reservations about the identification of Joe Stone with Short have been expressed in the past (I was myself uncertain on first hearing this 78 several years ago), but frequent playing of the Short and Stone 78s juxtaposed on tape removes all doubt. (Try comparing the way he sings "It was early this morning, I was lying down on my floor" in "Grand Daddy Blues" with "Sun rose this morning, I was lyin' down on my floor" in "It's Hard Time").

The first verse of "Back Door Blues" echoes the "Crowing (Banty) Rooster Blues" of Walter Rhodes and Charley Patton, although the basic verse is probably traditional. Although "Back Door" is slower-paced than "Hard Time", the guitar momentum conveys a
similar feeling of urgency to the performance. As with all J.D.'s pre-war sides, the vocal accents in each line rise and fall in an unusual pattern, adding extra impact to the singing. The lines of his blues are long, often exceptionally long, and sometimes crowding occurs, which results in some words being almost inaudible or omitted altogether.

I'm gonna buy me a little red rooster, mama, tie him at my back door (x2),
When he sees people passing by he will flap his little wings and crow.
I'm gonna buy me a bulldog 'cos my pistol's number fortyone (x2),
I'm gonna shoot you if you stand still, mama, I got a doggone dog to catch you if you run.

Catch the big boat at the Graveyard, I'm going back to New Orleans (x2),
Because ridin' on the water, mama, seems just like a tonic to me.
Sooner be buried in the river, mama, than to be buried in a hollow log,
Sooner be buried in the river, mama, buried in a hollow log,
'Cos I got a no-good faro and she treat me just like I was a dog.
When I leave this time, mama, please don't hang no hand-crepe on my door,
When I leave this time, mama, don't hang no hand-crepe on my door,
Because I won't be dead but I ain't coming back here no more.
Now I was blue this morning, mama, just as blue as any man can be,
Now I was blue this morning, mama, blue as any man can be,
And I'm wondering why mama that you can't get along with me.

(The stretch of the Mississippi River between St. Louis and Cairo, Illinois, contained many dangerous rocks on which steamboats were regularly wrecked in bad weather, and the worst part was once known as the "Graveyard". See chapter 25 of Mark Twain's "Life On The Mississippi").

The next three masters were devoted to recordings by James "Stump" Johnson, locally famous in St. Louis for his "Snitcher's Blues". On the third master (76841, "Don't Give My Lord Away") J.D. Short provided the guitar accompaniment under the billing "Joe C. Stone". (In the notes to DL-602, Bob Koester mentions the name J.C. Stoat as one of J.D.'s pre-war pseudonyms. He presumably got this from Short himself, perhaps mis-hearing 'Stone' as 'Stoat'.) Next in the studio was Roosevelt Sykes to make two "Willie Kelly" sides that were subsequently issued on Victor. J.D. was not to be heard on record again for almost thirty years.

(In the second part of this article I shall look at J.D. Short's postwar recordings and the last years of his long career as a blues artist.)

NOTE ON THE LYRIC TRANSCRIPTS
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Transcribing J.D.'s early recordings has presented some difficulties due to the inevitable deficiencies in recording quality, and J.D.'s tendency to compress or even omit words, but only in one instance has it proved impossible to complete a line, even after repeated listening. This is at the end of verse 4 of "Grand Daddy Blues", where the words are almost completely lost. In the transcripts I have on occasion omitted words like 'baby' (as in verse 2, line 2 of "Grand Daddy"), or left in a 'now' (actually omitted in repeat lines of "Barefoot blues", verses 1 and 2) or a 'mama' (repeat line verse 1 of "Back Door") where this does not affect the sense and saves space.
As the Depression began to recede in the middle thirties, recording activity started to pick up; but Chicago was now the major blues centre, and the field trips of the twenties were not repeated on anything like the same scale. St. Louis artists who had been popular in the late twenties, like Edith Johnson and Henry Brown, were not
recorded again, and the record companies stuck with established favourites like Roosevelt Sykes, Walter Davis and Pee Wee Wheatstraw. It was to be twenty-five long years before J.D. Short took part in another recording session.

In the late thirties, swing music was the thing, and after learning clarinet from Douglas Williams, J.D. played in Williams' swing band for some years. About the same time Big Joe Williams made St. Louis his base, and there was some musical contact between J.D. and Joe. J.D. seems not to have been much influenced by the Chicago blues of the thirties and forties, and he continued to perform the blues of his youth.

J.D. was almost 40 when he was drafted into the Army. From October, 1942, to March, 1943, he served with the 92nd Division before being invalided out following an injury received on an obstacle course which eventually caused his death twenty years later. It is unclear whether he was actually involved in active service, as suggested by the lyrics of his "Fighting For Dear Old Uncle Sam".

On his return to St. Louis following his discharge, J.D. went back to daywork, playing evening and weekend gigs when the blues were in demand. As recounted earlier, Bob Koester became interested in Short when he took over on harmonica from one Little Head or Little Hat (Little Hatchet?) at a Big Joe Williams rehearsal during the summer of 1955. Bob was sufficiently impressed with Big Joe and J.D. as a duo to arrange club dates and a concert at a local college, but after a few weeks Joe, ever the rambler, left town.

A couple of years went by, and then on February 8th, 1958, Big Joe arrived at Koester's record shop for a session, bringing J.D. with him to play harmonica. Apart from the fourteen or so Big Joe vocals, on most of which J.D. played harp, Bob also recorded an exciting instrumental ("Jumping In The Moonlight"), two J.D. vocals and a brief interview (part of which appears as "J.D. Talks" on DL-609), with a view to the eventual compilation of a full LP by Short. This was never to happen, as the next couple of years were occupied by Delmark's move to Chicago, the change of name to Delmark because of a previous copyrighting of the name, and the preparation and eventual issue of the very first LP by Big Joe Williams; this was "Piney Woods Blues" (DL-602), on which J.D.'s harmonica adds atmosphere to tracks like "No More Whiskey" (soloing after Joe's injunction to "tear it on down"), "Good Morning Little School-Girl" and "Drop Down Mama".

The two vocals that J.D. recorded for Delmark, "Stavin' Chain Blues" and "You've Got To Help Me Some", show the changes in his music since his pre-war sessions. The natural limitations of the harp/guitar format had resulted in simpler, more formalised instrumental accompaniments. The eccentric brilliancies of his pre-war guitar work had gone, although the relentless surge of harp and guitar could still generate excitement. Greater emphasis was now placed on his singing and the lyrics of his songs which, if perhaps not as rich and strange as his earlier compositions, are nonetheless both original and striking. "Stavin' Chain Blues" runs as follows:

Chorus: You can't get down like poor old Stavin' Chain,
Can't get down like poor old Stavin' Chain,
Killed a woman, served time for killing a man.

Stavin' Chain was known at Parchman, everybody knows,
Parchman Penitentiary wouldn't harm you none.

Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Well he served time for killing a woman,
Come back and served time for killing a man.

He threw his ball and chain, away he go,
Line that he's taking, people, he'd leave when he's travelling home.

Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Well he served time for killing a woman,
And time for killing a man.

Well happy little man, happy as he can be,
He knows boys, Stavin' Chain was his name.
Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
    Well he served time for killing a woman,
    Came back and served time for killing a man.

    Forty-five minutes, time to go,
    Get upside that tree Stavin' Chain, let's cut some more.

Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
    Well, you can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain.

    Love my baby, love her true,
    Think about you babe, what you gonna do.

Chorus: Oh, you can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
    Killed a woman, served time for killing a man.

    Well, threwed his shackles, broke away,
    But nobody can move like he can that day.

Chorus: Can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
    Well he killed a man, come back and killed a man.

The role of the mysterious Stavin' Chain as a sexual hero in Negro folk music has been examined at length in Richard A. Noblelli's limited edition booklet "Stavin' Chain (A Study In A Folk-Hero)" published in 1969, but space here permits only a cursory mention of this fascinating figure. Verses about Stavin' Chain are known by most bluesmen and songsters over 50 (eg. Hance Lipscomb and Jesse Fuller), but there are few examples of pre-war commercial recordings of "Stavin' Chain" and one of these, Johnny Temple's on Decca 7532, uses the phrase as a phallic symbol ("I wonder what's the matter with my stavin' (stave-in?) chain") rather than a name, as in Lil Johnson's Vocalion recording ("You can't ride this train, I'm the chiefy engineer I'm gonna run it like Stavin' Chain") now available on Stash 101. (I haven't as yet heard Jazz Gillum's "Stavin (sic) Chain" on Bluebird B-7985.) There are, however, several versions recorded in the field for the Library of Congress, notably those by Tricky Sam, Wilson Jones and Blind Willie McTell.

J.D.'s version is distinctive in that it specifically concerns a rounder, twice imprisoned at Parchman Farm following killings, who made his escape, in the tradition of Old Riley, and returned to his wenching ways. Noblelli mentions that Short knew another, slightly different version of the song, which he performed for Bob Koester. J.D. apparently met a singer who called himself Stavin' Chain in the Clarkdale area, sometime between 1912 and 1920. As Noblelli points out, it was probably quite common for a bluesman to take the name Stavin' Chain, just as some bluesmen were dubbed Lemon in imitation of Blind Lemon Jefferson.

"You've Got To Help Me Some" is a driving number which concerns a woman who comes in too drunk to make love to her man:

    Keep on loving on the bar-room floor,
    Make a funny move, baby, don't make no more,

Chorus: You better help me some, oh help me some,
    Now if you want to serve me high powered lovin',
    Oh babe, you got to help me some.

    Grind my coffee down on your floor,
    Don't want me baby, why in the world don't you let me know,

Chorus: You got to help me some etc.

    Late last night, half past four,
    Come in drunk, baby, wouldn't move any more,

Chorus:

    Love me baby, free good will,
    How can I get my thrill if you just keep on layin' still,

Chorus: (repeated twice)

    Late last night, half past four,
    Come in drunk, baby, wouldn't move any more,

Chorus:
J.D. later recorded this song for Sam Charters, but the two-guitar accompaniment on the Delmark version gives it the edge instrumentally. Big Joe and J.D. really thunder out the closing instrumental chorus. They also generate considerable instrumental excitement behind Big Joe's vocal on the old Sonny Boy Williamson number "Gonna Check Up On My Baby", during which Big Joe addresses J.D. as 'Jelly Joe'.

Sam Charters first met Short in 1960. By this time, J.D.'s health had begun to deteriorate. Circulation trouble had already led to the amputation of two of his toes, and it was steadily getting worse. When Sam decided to record J.D. at his home on Cole Street in the summer of 1962, neither could have had any idea that J.D. had less than four months left to live, and it is fortunate that enough songs were taped to provide a fitting testament to an outstanding and much under-rated artist.

Four of the recordings made at J.D.'s home on July 3rd, 1962, were issued the following year on FA 2467, a *Folkways* LP which also featured Library of Congress recordings by Son House. In addition, one track contains J.D.'s recollection of the time when Charley Patton stepped by his father's cabin and played his guitar.

The notes to this album, from which some of the basic information for this study has been drawn, indicate that J.D. was a gentle, sincere man, very different in temperament from his excitable cousin, Big Joe Williams. The photograph of J.D. that appears in Sam Charters' book *The Poetry Of The Blues* (Oak) shows him to have been both calm and possessed of a natural dignity. He is wearing a hat and a smart jacket with a carnation in the buttonhole, and holds a guitar with two round sound holes, and a neck harp fitted to it.

J.D. talked to Sam at length about the blues and blues singers, and some of his perceptive comments are reproduced in *The Poetry Of The Blues*, and included on the recent *Sonet* LP, discussed later.

"Well the blues first came from people being low in spirit and worried about their loved ones. It's a lot of times we can get worried and dissatisfied, and we can get to singing the blues, and if we can play music and play the blues we may play the blues for a while until we get kind of pacified. That cuts off a lot of worry. Sometimes the people that's listening at you have actually been through some of the same things that I have been through, and automatically that takes effect on them and that causes their attention to come on and listen at it."

In his notes to the *Folkways* LP, Charters admits to great difficulty in transcribing many of J.D.'s verses, but transcribing lyrics has never been Sam's strong point, and after careful listening I have been able to decipher all J.D.'s post-war recordings, except for the odd doubtful word.

"So Much Wine" starkly portrays the descent into oblivion of the wino, the wine-drinking alcoholic whose addiction is as deadly as that of the drug addict, but less brutally dramatic. Whenever I hear this gripping track, I think of the fate of L.C. Williams, an excellent Texas blues singer who was a protege of Lightnin' Hopkins and recorded for *Freedom, Gold Star* and *Sittin' In With*. Williams was a wino, and died at the age of 50. A photograph of him sitting on a porch accompanied an obituary by Paul Oliver and Mack McCormick in the March, 1961, *Jazz Monthly*, and the blank stare of the wino was all too obvious.

In the few lines Charters transcribes in the *Folkways* booklet he uses commas to suggest that J.D. is addressing a lady named Lucy in verse 3, but actually Sweet Lucy, like Sneaky Pete (verse 1) is a brand of cheap wine. In his version of "Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out" (included in "Leadbelly's Last Sessions, Volume 2"), Leadbelly refers to Sneaky Pete wine, and in conversation afterwards with Fred Ramsey explains that this is homemade wine, so potent that after drinking it "you start broadcastin' in the street!"

You know I got up this morning, boys, hadn't a bite to eat,
Just had to go round the corner, boys, get a shot of old Sneaky Pete.
Chorus: I drink so much wine, yes, so much wine,
Yes I drink so much wine, boys, want to drink a bottle in my doggone sleep.
See me walking along, boys, ain't said a doggone thing,
Just bet you five dollars I got to slip a long neck in my hand.
Chorus:
Knees got the rickets, head got to rolling,
Keep on drinking Sweet Lucy, life won't last me long.

Chorus:
Getting down to nothing, boys, nothing but skin and bones,
Doctor said, "Sweet Lucy? You know life can't last you long."

Chorus:
Don't believe Sweet Lucy would surely carry you down,
Just go out and hold a five and look all around.

Chorus:
Doggone wine getting down my throat,
Doggone Sweet Lucy about to get my goat.
Chorus: ("Well I drink..." instead of "Yes I drink...")

Well keep on drinking that no good wine,
Doctor about to shoot you right square in your spine.

Chorus:
(For the lighter side of wine drinking, listen to Sticks McGhee's hit, "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee", or Champion Jack Dupree's "Get Your Head Happy With Wine", which is all about getting high on Sneaky Pete.)

"Train Bring My Baby Back" is unique amongst J.D.'s issued recordings in that it features him playing harmonica only, rather than his usual rack harp/guitar combination. The aural shape of this piece harks back to the early days of the blues, with the harmonica filling in between the verses, to take the song just one stage beyond the field holler. A fascinating example of what the blues was like in its formative stages, recorded sixty years out of its time.

Bye bye train now, bring my baby back,
Bye bye train now, oh and bring my baby back,
Well, man, she got a new way of loving, man, about to drive me (a sack).

Well now I'm going uptown now baby, you know I'm going to buy me a Stetson hat,

Well now I'm going uptown now baby, I'm going to buy me a doggone Stetson hat,

Well now I'm going to satisfy my baby, I know just what my baby like.

Well now I know the only thing that will get my baby back,
Well now I know the right thing now, yes now to get my baby back,
Well now I'm gonna be a pimp, I'm gonna start to wearing a brand new Stetson hat.

Well I'm gonna come down through town with my brand new Stetson hat (x2),
Well the people tell me how I'm dressed, it's gonna make my baby come right back.

"You Been Cheating Me" has a chorus line which connects it to Leroy Carr's "How Long How Long Blues" (Vocation 1191, recorded in 1928), and to the earlier (1925) recording by Ida Cox, "How Long Daddy, How Long" (Paramount 12325). It may well derive from an early version of the "How Long" theme.

You know you been cheating me for another man,
Seems like, darling, all my love in vain,
Well how long, how long will this go on?

How long, how long will I have to be put down,
How long, how long will this go on?

You say you love me, oh yes you do,
Why do you do things make me so blue?
But how long, how long will this go on?

Stay away weeks at a time, I don't know where you at,
Well now baby, I love you yet,
But how long, how long will this go on?
Mistreated me at night, now you're feeling blue,
Well I just wish I had you to carry my troubles to,
Well how long, how long will this go on?

I'm here in town baby, without your love,
Well I just wanted you (to) carry my love,
How long, how long will this go on.

"Fighting For Dear Old Uncle Sam" is one of the most potent World War II blues on record. J.D. vividly evokes the grim scene of soldiers crouched in foxholes, surrounded by mud, barbed wire and bullets. There is wry humour in the reference to camp followers in verse one, but verse three brings home the harsh reality of war. The powerful drive of harmonica and guitar superbly complements J.D.'s impassioned singing, and the whole performance is country blues at its very best.

Time the war's all over, there's gonna be war right here (x2),
Well on account of so many women now totin' away the soldiers' monthly pay.

I may go down in South Pacific (or) go down in the European land (x2),
But I'm going down swinging boys, I'm going down fighting for dear old Uncle Sam.

So dark was the night now, people cold, cold was the ground (x2),
He and my buddies in some old foxhole, we had to keep our heads on down.

Well, machine guns and cannon roaring, boys we were afraid to raise our heads (x2),
You know I bet it cost a million dollars, boys now you know we'd all have been dead.

It's the first of the month now, salute the lieutenant and get our pay,
It's the first of the month now, salute the lieutenant boys and get our pay,
There's a little piece of paper laid on the side, sign it and send your wife home a lot of pay.

Some say they'll be so glad when the boys all come back home again,
Some say they'll be so glad, boys all come back home again,
You get so many soldiers without their pay, the soldiers ain't gonna be your friend.

Honey the war's all over, ain't nothing but a different shout,
Honey the war's all over, nothing but a different shout,
'Cause the war's all over, they just don't know what it's all about.

During the summer of 1962 Sam Charters was working on a film, using a hand-held 16mm camera to shoot the action, and a portable recorder for the soundtrack. When he was visiting St. Louis he filmed J.D.'s one-man-band performance of "Slidin' Delta", with J.D. beating out the rhythm on a small bass drum. The beater was a child's rubber ball on the end of an old metal rod, operated by his foot. Charters mentions that he played two harmonicas mounted on his guitar. The film, which also featured Memphis Willie Borisum, Pink Anderson, Furry Lewis, Baby Tate, Gus Cannon and Sleepy John Estes, was titled "The Blues", and premiered at the University of Chicago Folk Festival in January, 1963.

In 1967, recordings made for the film soundtrack were issued on LP. Asch A-101 includes the recording of "Slidin' Delta" made on the sidewalk in front of J.D.'s Cole Street home, complete with street noises. The recording balance tends to over-emphasise the accompaniment, but J.D.'s vocal is still audible, and although his habit of 'rushing time' (ie. progressively speeding up the tempo) is here rather disconcerting, the performance is a fascinating and unique one. The fragmentary lyrics and falsetto whooping and hollering are somewhat reminiscent of Tommy Johnson, and this similarity is discussed later in connection with another version of "Sliding Delta" which Short recorded.

J.D. introduces the recording with an explanation of blues feeling, from which I quoted in the preface to my book "The Blues Revival" (Studio Vista, 1971): "What I think about that makes the blues really good is when a fellow writes a blues and he makes it with a feeling, with great harmony, and there's so many true words in the blues, of things that have happened to so many people, and that's why it makes such a feeling in the blues."
Oh, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Hey, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
Well it took my baby, weeh ooh weeh.

Whoa, slow down train, let my baby on board,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Slow down train, let my baby on board,
I want to ride, eehooh, eehoh, train...

Oh, Slidin' Delta rocked me up and down,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Oh, Slidin' Delta rocked me up and down,
I'm goin' to keep on walkin', weehooh weehooh.

Now tell me babe, what you want me to do,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Now tell me babe, what you want me to do,
You may want me, eeheee won't be back no more.

Well I hate to hear, Slidin' Delta whistle blow,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Hate to hear, Slidin' Delta whistle blow,
Now every time I hear it, weehooh make me want to go.

Well come on baby, I'm goin' up the line,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Oh, come on baby, I'm goin' up the line,
Well that Slidin' Delta, ooh changed my baby's mind.

Well come on baby, have a walk with me,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Come on baby, have a little walk with me,
We gonna walk, weehooh weehooh weehooh...

(To be concluded in the next issue) 

BOB GROOM
In 1973, Sonet issued an LP (SNTF 648) containing ten J.D. Short recordings made by
Sam Charters in 1962. These are probably the tracks which were to have appeared on
BVLP 1079, "Sliding Delta", one of three Bluesville LPs which were scheduled by Prest-
tige, but never released because the series was terminated as a result of poor sales.
The other two non-appearing albums were 1078, by Edith Johnson and Henry Brown, and
1080 by George "Hot Cakes" Montgomery.) Altogether fifteen musical recordings from
the sessions Charters taped in July, 1962, have now been released. There is no indica-
tion of the order in which they were recorded, so I will discuss the Sonet tracks,
like the Folkways, in the order in which they appear on the LP.

"Starry Crown Blues" is a particular favourite of mine. The title line probably has
a gospel derivation, but the rest of the lyrics are strictly secular. Verse six has
a long history, and crops up (in slightly different form) in such diverse blues as
Stovepipe No. 1's "Court Street Blues" and Kokomo Arnold's "Backfence Picket Blues".

Yes I believe to my soul, peoples I have a starry crown (x2),
Yes I put shoes on your feet, baby, when your feet was on the cold, cold ground.
You know I bought you hair baby, well when you didn't have none (x2),
Well I got you all fixed up now, woman you want to take to the doggone streets
and run.

Well I ain't no bully now, ain't the baddest man in town (x2),
Well keep on messin' with my little woman, boy I swear I'll tear your doggone
playhouse down.

Yes, go and get ready now, move on the other side of town (x2),
Well keep on messin' with my little woman buddy, swear I'll tear your doggone
playhouse down.

Say her name is Hester, address ain't never been told (x2),
Well gettin' 'fraid somebody gonna steal my jelly roll.

I'm gonna tear me a picket now, off that doggone backyard fence (x2),
I'm gonna whup that woman of mine, great God until she learns some sense.

Although there is no harmonica on "My Rare Dog" (or should it be "My Red Dog"?)
J.D. still uses the flailed guitar accompaniment that he had developed for his one-
man band performances, and this speeds up progressively through the recording, until
by the guitar break between verses seven and eight he is going at a tremendous lick.
In this blues it is the woman who makes the midnight creep, but despite her inconst-
ancy, her man still cares so much for her that he is prepared to forgive and forget.

Oh, early this morning, I heard my rare dog bark (x2),
Well my love is gone away, she visit somewhere in the dark.
Well call your wife, know my baby not around (x2),
You can't hide from me baby, 'cause I ain't gonna let you put me down.

Come on home soon in the morning, 'cause you stayed away all last night (x2),
I want to know from you baby, do you call that treatin' me right?

Well in the wee, wee hours, no one to keep my company (x2),
Well I got the blues about my baby, I'm blue as any man can be.

Hold my hand, I'm really in love with you (x2),
Well you do things to me baby that I never would do to you.

Well I'm just sittin' down wonderin', tryin' to drive away my blues (x2),
Well I got the blues about my baby, no one else will do. *and

Well this morning about dawn, ooh, you come walkin' in (x2),
Well you been out makin' love with my old time friend.

I will forgive you baby, if you don't do that again (x2),
Well remember now baby, I always have been your friend.

Unlike most "rediscovered" bluesmen, J.D. did not record new versions of his pre-war blues (one wonders if Charters asked about them), but Sam's sympathetic questioning about old songs prompted J.D. to perform five blues that he learned in his youth; all of them are country blues standards, and among the oldest blues we know, dating back at least to the early years of this century. The first of these is J.D.'s version of "Bout A Spoonful" (mistitled "By The Spoonful" on sleeve and label). The earliest commercial recording of this song was by Pepa Charlie Jackson in 1925 (Paramount 12320), under the title "All I Want Is A Spoonful". This 78 probably helped to spread the popularity of a piece already widely known in the South. In contrast to Jackson's fairly lighthearted performance, Charley Patton's June, 1929, recording ("A Spoonful Blues", Paramount 12369) was a tough Delta blues rendition with slide guitar accompaniment. Patton accentuated the violent aspects of the song - "Would you kill my man? Yes, I will. You know I'd kill him, just 'bout a (spoonful)" - evoking the rowdy, sexually charged atmosphere of the country juke. Howlin' Wolf's superb 1960 recording of "spoonful", with Hubert Sumlin on guitar (Chess 1762) is a reworking of the traditional theme by Willie Dixon, introducing lines like "It could be a spoonful of coffee, could be a spoonful of tea, just a little spoon of your precious love, good enough for me." Wolf's menacing voice, with its echoes of Patton, is ideal for the mood of the song Charlie Jordan recorded a variant entitled "Just A Spoonful" (Vocalion 1543), which has almost nothing in common lyrically with the versions mentioned.

J.D.'s "Spoonful" probably derives from versions that pre-date commercial recording. It has some of the toughness of the Patton variant, but in other respects is closer to the songster versions of Nance Lipscomb ("Bout A Spoonful", Arhoolie F1001, recorded August, 1960) and Mississippi John Hurt ("Coffee Blues" on Vanguard VRS-9220 and VSD-19/20, and Rebel CLPS 1066); these have a slightly gentler feel about them, although the message, "just got to have my lovin' spoonful", is still clear.

The repeated phrase, "sugar my babe" is used in J.D.'s version, like Blind Lemon Jefferson's "doggone my bad luck soul" in "Bad Luck Blues" (Paramount 12445), to impart an insistent quality to the lyrics, in a manner akin to the "hook line" of popular songs.

I'll kill my ma, sugar my babe, about a spoonful, spoonful,
I'll kill my pa, sugar my babe, about a spoonful, spoonful.
It's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful,
It's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful.
It's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful,
It's all I crave, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave.
I'll kill my ma, sugar my babe, about a spoonful,
I'll kill my pa, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave.
It's a spoonful of this, sugar my babe, it's a spoonful of that,
It's a spoonful of this, sugar my baby, that killed the cat.
All I want is a spoonful,
That's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful.

All I crave, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave,
That's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful.

If it's all night long, sugar my babe, just a spoonful (x2).

It's a spoonful of this and a spoonful of that,
It's a spoonful of this, baby, that killed the cat.

It's all I crave, sugar my babe, just a spoonful (x2).

Carry me to my grave, carry me to my grave,
'Cos all I want, sugar my babe, is a spoonful.

All last night, all last night, if it's all last night,
I'm worried about it, just a spoonful.

I'll kill my me, sugar my babe, about a spoonful,
I'll kill my pa, sugar my babe, about a spoonful.

It's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful, spoonful,
It's all I crave, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave.

It's a spoonful of this and a spoonful of that,
It's a spoonful of this that I sure do like.

It was late last night, sugar my babe, want a spoonful (x3).

All I want, sugar my babe, carry me to my grave,
That's all I want, sugar my babe, just a spoonful.

"You're Tempting Me" uses the same melody as "So Much Wine" (on the Folkways LP), and consists of a series of complimentary remarks about a girl who is "real pigmeat". Most verses are variations on the basic chorus, given below, with the girl variously described as "awful neat", "a real pretty mama", "real kind mama". Lines like "I look in your face, your face seem so sweet" are rare in blues, which usually deals with failed relationships rather than courtship. "If I could just have a little bit talk...take a little walk with you"; the singer is definitely lovesick!

You know, baby, you lookin' awful neat,
You know baby, you look so sweet,
You're tempting me;
Oh, you're tempting me,
You're a fine, beautiful girl,
Oh you're tempting poor me.

In the Sonet LP sleeve notes, Charters suggests that J.D. always performed his songs the same way, but this certainly isn't true of the two versions of "Slidin' Delta" that J.D. recorded. Lyrically the two versions are very different; compare the following transcript with the one I gave in Part 2 from the Asch LP version:

Oh, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
Hear me cryin', I ain't dyin',
Oh, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
It made me think about my baby, ooh yea ooooh.

Oh early this morning, creeping through my door,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Oh, early this morning, crying through my door,
Well I hear that whistle blow and she won't blow here no more.

Oh, slow down train now, bring my babe back home,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Slow down train, bring my babe back home,
Well she been gone so long, ooh, make my poor heart moan.

One thing now, I don't understand,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
One thing now, I don't understand,
I been nice to my baby, ooh, she gone with another man.

Thought I heard, freight train whistle blow,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Thought I heard, freight train whistle blow,
And she blow just like, weeh weeh weeeh.

Oh run here mama, sit down on my knee,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Run here mama, sit down on my knee,
I want to understand now baby, how you treat poor me.

Oh, two trains running now, running side by side,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Two trains running now, running side by side,
Well one of the trains, ooh ooh weeh.

Now come on home baby, come to me,
You know I'm lonely as a man can be,
Oh, come on home, come on home to me,
You know I need your lovin' just as a man can be.

In answer to Sam's question, "What is the Sliding Delta?" J.D. stated that it was "an awful slow train (ran) down through Mississippi," and added humorously that "it was so slow that it almost slide like a turtle." He couldn't tell Sam which towns it ran through, having learned the song as a child from older singers. Mississippi John Hurt, who was ten years older than J.D., did know, though. It ran from Greenwood to Grenada, "from main line to main line." Four trains a day ran along this branch line. In his variant (which can be heard on Piedmont PLP 13161, and Vanguard VRS 9181 and VSD 19/20), John also works in the Big Katy Adams, a famous Mississippi steamboat.

The earliest issued recording of "Slidin' Delta" that I'm aware of is that by Tommy Johnson on Paramount 12975 (reissued on Southern Preservation Records, SPR/2/Flyright LP 114). This was recorded in 1930, when the song was already at least 25 years old. Although J.D.'s two performances are overall very different from Johnson's, there are similarities, notably the falsetto whooping and hollering that both use, and the common first verse.

"I'm Just Wastin' My Time" is a bitter mistreater blues with a "love in vain" verse akin to those of Robert Johnson and Rice Miller. As J.D. comments, "the blues mostly came on account of women. ..." The harmonica is absent on this track, and J.D. contributes a rocking guitar accompaniment, with R&B touches and a solid boogie beat.

Told me you love me, told me to my face,
Gotta someone else in my place.

CHORUS: I'm just wastin' my time, oh wastin' my time,
I'm wastin' my time baby, foolin' around with you.
You do everything, make me feel so sad and blue,
Then you still want me to play in love with you.

CHORUS

Well late last night, half past four,
I come home knockin' on my real good door.

CHORUS

Seem like all my love is all in vain,
You carryin' your love to some other man.

CHORUS

Hand me down your love right now,
Don't mean me no good, I'm goin' somewhere.

CHORUS

Why did you do me like you do?
Do things baby, make me sad and blue.
CHORUS

Well, keep on rollin' across my floor,
You don't want me, why in the world don't you let me know?

CHORUS

Well up so high, down so low,
Now your man surely got to go.

CHORUS

"Red River Blues" must surely be one of the oldest country blues. It has occurred in one form or another throughout the South. The Red River divides Texas from Oklahoma, then bends southwards to flow right across Louisiana before joining the Mississippi River near the Mississippi state line. On the way it passes through Shreveport and Alexandria, Louisiana, and cuts off a corner of Arkansas around Texarkana. The earliest recording of the song referring to it that I know of is that by Henry Thomas (Vocational 1137, cut in October, 1927); Thomas was known as "Ragtime Texas," and was born in Upshur County in that state in 1874. Probably the song originated in the East Texas area.

Texas songster Nance Lipscomb recorded "Red River Run" for Reprise in 1961 (Reprise 2012). Whereas Thomas used only the basic "Which way do the Red River run? (x3) It run north and south" verse, and a striking "Look where the sun done gone (x3), It's gone God knows where", adding the "all out and down" and "poor boy" verses to complete the song, Nance presents a more developed version: "Which-a-way do Red River run? East, west, then north and south, run by my baby's house", before launching into "I'm goin' to Dallas in the fall", etc.

There are a number of Piedmont variants; by Virgil Childers from North Carolina (on Bluebird B7464, cut in 1938): "Which-a-way do the blood red river run? Run from my window to the risin' sun", by Sonny Terry (swapping verses with Aleck Seward and Woodie Guthrie on Archive of Folk music FS-206); by Maryland songster Bill Jackson (Testament 7-2201); and by Peg Leg Hovell ("Blood Red River" on Testament T-2204). In the main, these versions refer to a red river (the track of the sun through the sky, I have seen it), rather than the Red River, although Bill Jackson's version is specific: "Which-a-way do Red River run? From my back window to the risin' sun. Some say it runs east, some say it runs west, But I believe to my soul it runs straight up and down." Howell even works in the "longest train" and "Joe Brown's coal mine" versi

Leadbelly's "Red River Blues" (Storyville SLP 124) is slightly different from both the basic Texas and Piedmont versions: "Tell me which-a-way Red River run (x2), Some say it run from sun to sun. Red River is so deep and wide (x2), Say I can't get a letter from the other side. The old folks always tell me it run from east to west (x2), And I always believe that they know the best."

The version of "Red River Blues" that J.D. Short recorded for Sam Charters was titled "The Red River Run", and was apparently learned from a Hollandale, Mississippi, bluesman who went by the name of "Coot". It opens with a stanza very similar to the one used by Henry Thomas, but with the addition of a line not found in any of the variants quoted above. The two references to the Indian Territory in J.D.'s song hark back to the days when Oklahoma was still the land of the Cherokee Indians.

Which-a-way, which-a-way, do the Red River run?
Which-a-way do Red River run?
Now some say it runs both north and south,
Well I say it run down Indian Territo'.

Now I went to the gypsy, for to have my fortune told,
Well the gypsies all told me, doggone my bad luck soul.

I done walked, I done walked, till my feet got sookin' wet,
Lookin' for my fair brown, I ain't found her yet.

I done walked Red River, I done walked it up and down,
Well, lookin' for my baby, my baby can't be found.
Now your house is on fire, now your building's burnin' down,
I'm goin' to keep on walkin' baby, till I find my teasin' brown.

Which-a-way, which-a-way, do the Red River run?
Which-a-way do Red River run?
Now some say it runs both north and south,
But I say it runs now by my baby's house.

Come on home, come on home, lookin' for you all day long,
But which-a-way do the Red River run?

Come on home, come on home, I need you all night long,
Come on home to me baby, I need you all night long.

Late at night, late at night, no-one to keep my company,
Come on home, come on home baby, I need you up to day.

Which-a-way, which-a-way, do the Red River run?
Well some say it run, now baby, north and south,
When I first left for Indian Territo',
When I said hello to the Indian Territo'...

"Help Me Some" is very similar to the version recorded for Delmar(k), with the third line of the chorus slightly amended to "you sure got to help me some". J.D. omits the "grind my coffee" verse and adds two new ones as verses four and five:

Well I'm callin' you honey, callin' you sugar pie,
I be lovin' you now till the day I die.

Love is a thing that only time can bring,
Love you so much till I just can't explain.

Sam asked J.D. where the music for the blues came from, and Short replied that he thought it came "from the harmony of the old songsters years ago". His comment that it was only in later years that the blues acquired a downbeat, a boogie beat, is most interesting, in that it corresponds with what Blind Willie McTell had to say on the subject when interviewed for the Library of Congress. J.D. dates the first blues he heard to 1908, and Willie mentions this year as the one after which the blues became "original". This is not the place for a discussion of the origin of the blues, but I find it very significant that both McTell and Short dated the appearance of the country blues as a separate musical form to the period 1904-1914. It is also of interest that, in an interview with Frederic Ramsey Jr., included in Leadbelly's "Last Sessions", Huddie Ledbetter dates the beginning of "walking the basses", the downbeat in the blues, to 1904-05.

Charters asked Short if he remembered people singing in the fields, and inquired, after J.D. confirmed that he did, what was the first blues J.D. heard. Short responds with a beautiful unaccompanied version of "East St. Louis Blues".

I walked all the way from East St. Louis today,
Now I did not have but the one old lousy dime.

I done walked, I done walked, till my feet got soakin' wet,
I been lookin' for my baby, I ain't found her yet.

Now your house is on fire, babe your building's burning down,
Now you heard baby, you needed over yonder in town.

"Make Me Down A Pallet On The Floor" is one of the most recorded blues songs, and certainly one of the oldest, a distinction it shares with "Careless Love", "Hesitation Blues" and a few other evergreens, and has been recorded by artists as diverse as Willie Brown, Mama Yancey, Jelly Roll Morton and John Hurt. It was already a country blues standard in the early twenties, and although presumably considered "old hat" by the record companies, who largely ignored the song, it was in the repertoir of most blues performers. Most of the recorded versions have been made in recent years, for example Mississippi John Hurt's uptempo version on Vanguard VRS-9220 (1954), which has a guitar accompaniment strikingly similar to one used by Elizabeth Cotton.

J.D.'s version of "Pallet" is the final track on the Sonet LP, and one of his best performances. The first half consists of versions of the "pallet" verse, while the
second links three related verses, each consisting of one line repeated three times in the fashion of the earliest blues artists (cf. Henry Thomas).

The chorus varies slightly each time, but the basic version runs as follows:

Make me down one pallet on your floor, lawd, lawd, lawd, lawd,
Make me down a pallet on your floor,
Won't you make me down one pallet on your floor,
Oh fix it so your man won't never know.

Honey babe, my back don't never get tired (x2),
Now sugar my babe, my back don't never get tired
Late last night when I come walkin' in (x3).

I found a man hangin' round my gate (x3).

Get my old forty-four and he won't hang there no more (x3).

In the past I have had some rather harsh things to say about certain aspects of Sam Charters' writings on the blues, justifiably I think, but one can have nothing but praise for his efforts in interviewing and recording oldtime bluesmen. In particular I appreciate the way he has kept faith with the artists. It is more than 12 years since J.D. Short died, and but for Sonet giving Charters a free hand in his selection of materials in their "Legacy Of The Blues" series, we would have heard no more of J.D.'s artistry than his handful of prewar recordings, and an equally sparse handful on Delmark, Folkways and Asch. Thanks to Sonet and Charters, we are in possession of a full picture of J.D. Short's work, and a fitting memorial to the music of a great Mississippi blues singer.

(NOTE: This article was written before the Mamlish reissue of a June, 1931, recording of "She's Got Jordan River In Her Hips" (Victor 23288) by R.T. Hanen. The sleeve-note to the Mamlish LP contains the assertion that R.T. Hanen is a pseudonym for J.D. Short and points out that the tune of "She's Got Jordan River In Her Hips" closely resembles that of one of Short's Folkways LP tracks. It seems odd that Short does not play any instrument on this Louisville, Kentucky, recording - the guitar accompaniment is by Clifford Gibson and Roosevelt Sykes is on piano - but vocally it does sound likely that Hanen is Short. "Happy Day Blues", the reverse of the Victor 78, suggests that as "life is so short" everyone ought "to have a happy time before we go".)

BOB GROH