This album consists of some worksongs performed by black convicts in Texas prisons in the middle 1960s. The tradition is now pretty much defunct; that demise happened in the past ten years. The worksong lasted in prison because it helped people make it. It helped them survive; it died because it was no longer useful.

The worksong is not a song about work or a song one happens to sing while work goes on; it is a song that helps a person or group of persons do work.

The worksong tradition isn’t exclusively black — sailors used them for hoisting sail and raising anchor. Greeks used them while treading grapes. Scots used them while pulling tweed — but blacks are the only Americans whose worksong tradition survived into the twentieth century. That is because they were the only twentieth century Americans who needed worksongs.

In West Africa, worksong lyrics were often religious; in North America, some were based on spiritual songs, but more had to do with the specifics of the work situation, with things that were absent (women and family and freedom) and things that were present (the guards, the wire, the unending fields).

The prison worksongs served at least four important functions:

1. They helped supply a meter for work, which was useful for survival in the dangerous work of tree-cutting, efficient in other kinds of work, and, according to the singers, a more aesthetically pleasing way of working.
2. They helped pass the time, which is nice, because prison labor is usually boring.
3. They offered a partial outlet for the inmates’ tensions and frustrations and anger. There is a long tradition in the South of the black man being permitted to sing things he is not permitted to say; the whites never assumed the words blacks sang had any meaning. “In the river songs,” one inmate said, “you tell the truth about how you feel. You can’t express it to the boss. They really be singing about the way they feel inside. Since they can’t say it to nobody, they sing a song about it.” (In Texas, black convicts called the worksongs “river songs” because all of the Texas prisons were located on the Brazos or Trinity river bottomlands.)
4. They kept a man from being singled out for whippings because he worked too slowly. The songs kept all together, so no one could be beaten to death for mere weakness. In Texas, slow workers were punished by ten or more licks with the “Bat,” a strip of leather 30 inches long, four inches wide, one-quarter inch thick, attached to a wooden handle. One

inmate said, “When the hide’d leave, the skin’d leave with it.”

There were different songs for different kinds of work. They varied in verbal, metric, melodic and choral complexity. White inmates of the same prisons had nothing like them, nor, so far as I know, did they ever join the black inmates when desegregation began in the 1960’s. One black inmate told me the songs the blacks get by with much less work because the guards didn’t understand how much the group could slow down the pace with notice. I asked why the whites never picked them up and he said, “They just ain’t got the rhythm.”

Because the worksong was more functional than entertaining, it had a different aesthetic from performance songs. Rhyme was rare; usually, especially in the faster songs, the leader would simply sing the same line twice and the group would repeat a regular chorus. A good leader was not known for the lovely voice tones, but rather by an ability to be heard over the noise of the work going on, by ability to maintain a steady beat, by ability to keep coming up with enough verses. The songs are lyric, narrative is rare, so the lead singer could easily draw from a large stanzaic repertory or even make up lines as he went along. There were many formulaic devices for extending a song.

The fastest and simplest songs were those used for cutting down trees. The work was called crosscutting. The men would position themselves around a tree; I’ve seen as many as eight men working around one trunk. Half the men would swing from right to left, the other half — in alternating positions — would swing from left to right. These were the fastest songs because the axe never rested on the ground, so it was easier to keep moving at a steady pace, and also because in the crosscutting songs half the group would hit at a time, so there were two axe sounds for each work cycle. The strikes are cleaner, more in unison, in these songs than in other axe and hoe songs. That is because if one is out of position while crosscutting, he might lose a hand or get scalped.

Somewhat slower were the axe songs used for logging, the job of cutting a felled tree into small sections. In the old days, the logs were used to fire water boilers, heat stoves in the barracks, fire the boilers in the sugar cane processing plant, and for lumber. When these recordings were made, wood was still used for lumber, but the trunks were no longer used for heating rooms or water in the barracks. Some was still used in the cane plant the last time I visited, but the other uses were gone, so there was little need for short logs. The best chopper would get the
When old Hannah go to beamin'  
When old Hannah go to beamin'  
When old Hannah go to beamin'  
Lord God amighty  
When old Hannah go to beamin'  
When old Hannah go to beamin'  
In them long hot summer days

Make you want to see your mama...

Everybody gets worried...

When old Rattler go howlin'...

When the bosses go to squabblin'...

Make you want to walk the water...

4. I'M IN THE BOTTOM  
Johnny Jackson and group, spading,  
Ramsey One Camp, August 22, 1965 (40-A*)

This song was improvised while Jackson and three other men were doing some work with spades one afternoon; I never heard it before or after that day. A year later I asked Jackson if he remembered it and he said, "No, but I could make another one up." The timing is the same as for the crosscutting songs; the workers slap the backs of the spades on the ground on the return stroke, which has the effect of doubling the apparent work tempo. The structure is as simple as most of the crosscutting songs: the leader calls out a line, the group responds, the leader repeats the line, the group responds with a slightly different burden for the repeat; occasionally the leader happens to rhyme, but there is no aesthetic pressure to do so.

In the bottom', lordy now wo  
I'm in the bottom, oh lord  
I'm shovelin' dirt...  
I'm getting tired...  
It's in the mornin'...  
I'm shovelin' cinder...  
It's in the evenin'...  
It's for the captain...  
I started achin'...  
All in my shoulder...  
The boss don't believe it...  
Here in my side man (??)...  
I'm hurtin' all over...  
Take me to the buildin'...  
I need some water...  
I need a doctor...  
My heart is achin'...  
Boss say I'm fakin'...  
What I'm gonna do, man...  
Gonna write my mother...

5. CAPTAIN DON'T FEEL SORRY FOR A LONGTIME MAN

Ebbie Vesey, Marshall Phillips and Theo Mitchell, Wynne Unit, August 18, 1965 (27*)

Tell her see the governor...  
Ask him do somethin'...  
I can't move now...

This cotton song consists of three parts: (I) the opening section of four stanzas; (II) the five-line stanza in which Vesey shifts the meter and melodic form somewhat ("Tell mama, a-tell mama...") which leads into the second regular section with the full group; (III) then the part in which Veasely and Phillips sing while Mitchell drops to his knees and chants the Lord's Prayer, with a final pair of stanzas in the form of the second regular section. Note that before Mitchell begins praying he takes the lead for one stanza and announces that he is going to pray; when he finishes, he sings, "I done prayed now" and the others respond to him immediately: "Oh pray a little longer." It is very rare that the antiphonal quality of these songs has such a dramatic counterpart; usually the antiphony is textual only. This is the only song I know in the Texas prison canon where there is a sense of two different enti-
ties communicating with one another — usually we hear a group supplying a chorus for the lead singer or singing along with him.

Veesley:  
Well I'm gonna write my mama,  
And tell her to pray for me.  
Mama, I got lifetime on this ole river, river,  
Little girl and never go free.

Well I'm gonna write my mama,  
And tell her (II) she wanna see me free, (one  
    sings: alive)  
Mama, just send me a box a cartridge,  
Mama, 'n a forty-five.

Captain, don't you never feel sorry, sorry,  
Captain, for a longtime man.  
He say, "Little boy, I don't never feel sorry, oh sorry,  
Little boy, till I drive you down."

Well I called my mama,  
And she could not come.  
Well I called my partner,  
Little boy, and broke and run.

(Others are calling and chanting during this stanza, which is used to shift the meter; only  
Vesey's words are transcribed here)
Tell mama, a-tell mama,
A-tell mama, tell-a mama not to worry,
Mama, don’t you worry, Godamighty don’t worry.
Goin’ tell mama, goin’ tell my mama,
Godamighty don’t you worry.

Don’t you worry ’bout my time-muh (3x)
Don’t you worry ’bout my time.

Mama, I got a life time, (3x)
Don’t you worry ’bout my time.

Godamighty, look-a yonder (3x)
Well a-yonder comes the sergeant (2x)
Well he’s riding in a hurry (2x)
Godamighty look-a-yonder (2x)
I gotta break and run, suh (3x)

I’m gonna call Rattler’,
Well I b’lieve I’ll call Rattler (2x)
That a man done gone, suh...

Well I b’lieve I’ll pray now (3x) [Mitchell takes lead]
Godamighty, God knows.

(While Veasley and Phillips continue the song, Mitchell drops to his knees and begins chanting the Lord’s Prayer; only the lines chanted by Veasley and Phillips are transcribed here.)

I gotta pray in a hurry (3x)
Godamighty, God knows.

Well he’s ridin’ in a hurry (3x)
Godamighty, God knows.

I got to make it to my mama.
I’m gonna make it to my mama.
I got to make it to my mama,
Godamighty, God knows-suh (6x)

(While Veasley and Phillips sing the last "God-ami-ty, God knows-suh," Mitchell chants, "Well I done prayed now." The other two respond as indicated below. The first of the transcribed lines of the final stanza below is sung by Mitchell — "Now I ain’t goin’ worry" — which he sings for the next two lines, as the others sing "Godamighty, don’t worry.")

Pray a little longer.
Oh pray a little longer.
Won’t you pray a little longer,
Godamighty, God knows-suh.

Well I ain’t gonna worry (Mitchell, 3x)
Godamighty don’t worry, (Veasley and Phillips, 2x)
Godamighty, God knows-suh.
6. DOWN THE LINE
Houston Page and group, Flatweeding, Ramsey One Camp, August 22, 1965 (58)

This flatweeding song seems to derive from a well-known crosscutting song, "Plumb the Line." The melodies of both songs are similar, and both use the naming catalog for the stanza sequence. Both may derive from a spiritual, "Plumb the Line," versions of which are found in Lydia Parish, Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands (New York, 1942), 67-70, and Harold Courlander, Negro Songs from Alabama, 2nd ed (New York, 1963), 55. "Down the Line," as many of the simpler worksongs, is definitely expandable: the leader need only insert different nouns in any of the line patterns (i.e., anyone he thinks of might be "in Houston now," and not only is Black Betty "in the bottom now" but so are any inmates or guards he cares to mention).

Oh well I b'lieve I'll roll on, down the line (3x)
It takes a number one driver, down the line.

A-well, Black Betty's in the bottom now...
A-well, my gal is in Houston now...
A-well, I'm callin' on you lead row'...
A-well, I'm callin' on you tail row'...
Oh well, the captain is a-ridin' now...
A-well, I b'lieve I'll roll on...

7. EARLY IN THE MORNING
Willie "Cowboy" Craig and group, logging, Ellis, March 24, 1966 (56-A)

The first sextet has lyrics often in "Midnight Special," a well-known prison song; the second sextet has lyrics often found in a worksong variously called "Homing on a Live Oak Log" or "Move Along 'Gator." After those two sextets, the song becomes an idiosyncratic chant of Cowboy's, and the meter alters as that personal change takes place — from a regular eight-beat phrase to a seven-beat phrase. The eccentricity of that seven-beat shift (I don't know any other song in the Texas worksong canon where a similar construction occurs) probably accounts for the change in the way the group sings along: at first they harmonize, but after those first twelve lines their participation becomes far more casual. The occasional irregularity of the axe strokes is caused partly by the odd line length and partly by the more relaxed requirements of logging (as compared to crosscutting, where the axe strokes must be in time). Midline commas in the transcription indicate strong cues in the singing.

Well it's early in the morning, when the ding-dang ring.
Go a marching to the table, got the same damn thing.
Well it's nothing on the table, but the spoon and the pan.
If you say a thing about it, catch the hell out of the man.
Hollerin' oh my lordy, oh my lordy, lord.
Hollerin' oh my lordy, oh my lordy, lord.

Well I'm down in the bottom, on a live oak log.
Well I'm down there rollin', like a lowdown dog.
Well the captain and the sergeant, come a riding alone.
Say, You get go to haming", if you want to go home."
Hollerin' oh my lordy, oh my lordy, lord.
Hollerin' oh my lordy, oh my lordy, lord.

Partner got to hold 'em, hold 'em no longer
Godamighty knows, Godamighty knows
Partner who's the rider, partner who's the rider
Godamighty knows
Hollerin' wo lord, Godamighty knows
Partner can't hold me, hold me no longer
Partner's got the robber", partner's got the rob
What you call the robber, crane wing" robber

Godamighty knows
Wo lord, Godamighty knows
Partner got to help me, help me to call 'em, Godamighty knows
Make it dead easy, make it dead easy
Godamighty knows, Godamighty knows
Believe I'll call for water
Godamighty knows, Godamighty knows
Waterboy, oh waterboy
Bring me a drink a water, bring me a drink a water
Godamighty knows
Don't want to drink it, don't want to drink it
Godamighty knows
Pour it on my diamond", pour it on my diamond
Diamond strikin' fire, Godamighty knows
Hollerin' wo lord, Godamighty knows
Partner's gettin' worried, partner's gettin' worried
Worried 'bout Mabel, Mabel and the baby
Godamighty knows
Hollerin' wo lord, Godamighty knows
Partner I got to leave, partner I got to leave
Leave you doggin'", Godamighty knows
Leave you doggin', doggin' with the crane
Doggin' with the crane, Godamighty knows
Hollerin' wo lord, Godamighty knows
Godamighty knows...
HAMMER

Ring Henry Scott and group, crosscutting, Ellis, August 21, 1955 (38)

This simple song — all stanzas are simply one line sung twice with the group joining for the brief chorus — is probably the most frequently sung axe song in Texas prisons. I have recorded 19 versions by 13 different leaders; the Archive of Folk Song Checklist of Recorded Songs lists nine performances, all but one from Texas. There are hundreds of stanzas for “Hammer Ring,” but older inmates often include in the lyrics a group of stanzas about Noah being sent to cut big timber for his ark (hence the association). In one 32-stanza version by an inmate who had been in since 1938 (he was out twice for short periods, but shot up some people and was sent back) there were seven stanzas at the beginning having to do with the prison, then the other 25 stanzas formed a coherent narrative about Noah getting his commission, making the boat, people laughing at him, the floods coming, the attempts of the laughers to get on board, and Noah’s refusal because “the angels got the keys.” Scott is younger and his version lacks the Biblical sections. His song is a call to his fellow workers to keep up with him, to sing loud enough to give him spirit; he calls about his woman far away and sings a while about a well-known guard (one reputed to have killed many inmates) from the old days, one “Jack O Diamonds.” “Jack O Diamonds” figures in many versions of this song, mainly because most versions (not this one for some reason) have a few lines about the worker’s diamond (argot for his axe), which leads to thoughts about the guard with the same name.

I’m goin’ down to the bottom*, let your hammer ring... (2x)
A-just to ring my hammer...
I got a nine-pound hammer...
I’m gonna ring it in the bottom...
Well my partner’s got worried...
I can’t hear my partner’s holler...
I’m gonna call a little louder...
I’m goin’ down to the Brazal (Brazos)*...
Oh just to cool my hammer...
Oh well I believe I call baby...
Oh well my baby’s Evalina...
Oh Evalina I call you...
I got a letter from baby...
’Cause well my baby’s Elora...
’Cause well I believe I spied (the) rider...
Oh well who was (the) rider...
Oh well he rode ’em on the Brazos...
Oh Jack O Diamonds (was) a ruler...
A well he drove ’em on the Brazos...
A well butt-cut’ crackin’...
9. FALLIN' DOWN

Joseph "Chinaman" Johnson and group, crosscutting, Ellis, August 21, 1965 (42-A)

A few minutes before a big tree falls, it begins to "get limber," that is, it starts rocking slowly back and forth in a narrow arc that increases a few degrees with each rock and as more and more chips are cut out clos-

er to the center. As the tree rocks there are splintering noises — "crackin'" in the song — made as uncut fibers are ripped apart. If the men happen to be singing when that process starts, they sometimes change to this song, or one like it, to warn the other workers in the area that the tree will be falling soon. One inmate said, "When the tree get ready, when they cut that tree almost down and it's almost ready to fall, some a them will be draggin' brush and so they [the axemen] will be singing to the ones that's draggin' brush to tell them to get out of the way: "Timber gettin' limber."

Chinaman's opening line, "A-well my hammer keep a hangin'," refers to the tendency of the axe to stick in the notch in the rocking tree, caught by the compression caused by the weight of the entire tree on a decreasing center.

A-well my hammer keep a hangin', 'cause it's fallin' down (2x)

A-well my timber gettin' limber...
A-well my diamond strikin' fire...
A-well the tree is gettin' limber...
You better watch him, better watch him...
Oh if it hit you, don't you holler...
I done warned you 'n' done told you...
You better watch him, better watch him...
A-well my timber gettin' limber...

10. LOG LOADING

This section consists of talk, yells, calls, and chants uttered while a group of inmates loaded long logs onto a metal flatbed trailer on Ellis (March 22, 1966). There is random chatter until the leaders call out to get everyone together for the three parts of the task — lifting the log from the ground, moving it forward to the side of the trailer, then lifting it and heaving it up to the trailer bed. Some of the song fragments here (such as the "Raccoon up a 'simmon tree' verse) date at least from early in the 19th century.

Oh well my diamond strikin' fire...
If it hit you don't you holler...
I done warned you 'n' done told you 'bout...
You better watch it everybody...
So soon in the mornin' and it's...

11. GRIZZLY BEAR

Benny Richardson and group, crosscutting, Ellis, March 22, 1966 (33-A)

Many inmates believed this song was about Carl Luther MacAdams, who was for a long time warden of Ellis (the unit for multiple recidivists, troublemakers, escape risks, etc.), and before that warden of Ramsey (which served the same functions before Ellis Unit was built in the early 1960s). MacAdams had the reputation of being the toughest and fairest warden in the Texas prison system; there were many folktales about how in the old days he broke up riots by walking into the riot areas alone and taking off rioters one by one until there were none left because most ran away before he was finished with whatever he was doing. MacAdams' nickname was "The Track" or "Beartracks," and the songs was connected with him because of the similarity of his nickname and the name of the song's protagonist.

But whatever inmates in the 1960s thought about the song's inspiration, old-timers insist it wasn't MacAdams at all, but someone who worked in the prison long before he joined it in the late 1930's, a man named Joe Oliver. One inmate said, "Jack O Diamonds had a man up under him, his name was Joe Oliver and they named him
‘Jack the Bear.’ You could see him comin’ from the bottom and they’d say, ‘There come Bear.’ Then other guys, if they folcin’ around in any kind of ways, then they know that the captain is coming and they’ll tighten up a little bit. And so guys just got together, go to practi-
cing, and someone said, ‘You just follow me.’ Got out there in the woods and we just
got to hollering and eventually they made a
song out of it. And that’s where it started from."

“It didn’t start with Captain Mac then?” I asked him.

“MacAdams? Oh, he wasn’t even in the
system when that song came down, don’t let
nobody tell you he was. He got the name of
Big Bear. See, Warden MacAdams, I don’t
know how long he had been in the system,
but he ain’t been in that long. Don’t let
nobody tell you that song was built up
behind MacAdams because it wasn’t.
Originally that song was built behind Joe
Oliver. Joe Oliver was the one they called
Jack the Bear, he was the assistant warden
under Jack O’Diamonds. Oliver left the first
of ’41.”

It may be true that the song existed
before MacAdams came into the prison sys-
tem or got his nickname, but it is peculiar
that there are no versions recorded before
1951. The Lomaxes did a thorough job of cov-
ering the Texas prisons when they visited
them in the 1930s and it seems odd that they
should have missed completely a song as
popular as this one was. It is possible that
the song was in circulation, but only on the
one or two prison farms they didn’t visit. In
any event, what matters is that the song does
seem to have been around for a while and
that inmates in the 1960s connected it with
Warden MacAdams, “The Bear.”

The song was widely known when I vis-
itied the Texas prisons. I recorded twelve
versions performed by five different song lead-
ers. (‘Grizzly Bear,’ “Hammer Ring,” and
“Crooked-Foot John” (also known as “Lost
John,” not on this album) were the three most
frequently heard crosscutting songs.)

The version heard here is really a bal-
lad, quite rare in the convict worksongs; they
are usually lyrics with occasionally related
sequences of stanzas, but completely
sequential and coherent texts are seldom
heard. Richardson begins by singing “I
wanna tell you a story,” and he concludes,
“That’s a my story.” He is not only singing a
ballad, but is conscious enough of that to
point it out in a frame for the narrative.

There is, for me, something approaching
the epic mood in this text. His bear travels
widely (all over the southwest — Texas,
Oklahoma, Louisiana — and even north to
Tennessee) killing stock and people, eluding trackers everywhere. When first trapped, the bear kills two men; he is captured in Tennessee and escapes again; he is caught somewhere else and put in a zoo, then escapes once more. Finally there comes "a little man... that been a-huntin' bears long time now," and by that man the bear is finally killed. Like Faulkner’s bear, he cannot be killed by just anyone — it requires a special person.

I wanna tell you a story 'bout a grizzly bear, I wanna tell you a story 'bout a grizzly bear.

He was a great big grizzly, grizzly bear, He was a great big grizzly, grizzly bear.

You know he laid a tracks like a grizzly bear, He had a great big paws like a grizzly bear.

I said a grizzly, grizzly, grizzly bear, Oh Lord have mercy, grizzly bear.

You know they tracked him through a Texas now, grizzly bear, He went down to Oklahoma now, grizzly bear.

You know the people tried to catch him now, grizzly bear

Because he was a-killing stock now, grizzly bear

I said a grizzly, grizzly, grizzly bear, Well a Lord have mercy, grizzly bear.

You know 'way down in Louisiana now, grizzly bear, He was a-runnin' in the swamp now, grizzly bear.

He was killin’ every thing, grizzly bear, He got a woman on a plain, grizzly bear.

You know the people got a-scared a the grizzly bear, They wouldn’t come out for fear of him, grizzly bear.

He stood ten feet tall like a grizzly bear, He had a big bone paw like a grizzly bear.

I said a grizzly, grizzly, grizzly bear, Oh Lord have mercy, grizzly bear.

You know we caught the big grizzly, grizzly bear, You know he killed two men and he, grizzly bear.

They hemmed him up in Tennessee again, grizzly bear, He didn’t go nothin’ but get loose again, grizzly bear.

He was a mean old grizzly, grizzly bear, He was a mean, mean grizzly, grizzly bear.

Oh grizzly, grizzly, grizzly bear, Oh Lord have mercy, grizzly bear.

Well they finally caught him now, grizzly bear, They tried to put him in the zoo and now, grizzly bear.

You know he knocked down a man and he, grizzly bear, He tried to enter twelve times and he, grizzly bear.

He stood on his two feet and he, grizzly bear, He growled all day long and he, grizzly bear.

But they had a little man and now, grizzly bear, That been a-huntin' bears long time now, grizzly bear.

Well a grizzly, grizzly, grizzly bear, Oh well a-Lord have mercy, grizzly bear.
Glossary

Black Betty: Wagon or truck used to take men from the county jails to the prison farms.

bottom: fertile land near one of the rivers

Brazos: river on whose banks all the “lower farms” (Ramsey, Retrieve, Harlem, Darrington) are located

Bull: Bull Durham — the cigarette tobacco the men are issued

butt-cut: the thickest cut on a felled tree

catch the train: join the chain (q.v.)

catch the hall: When a man commits an infraction of the prison rules he is told to “catch the hall” when he returns to the building that night, that is, wait to see the major for a summary trial

chain: any group of convicts being moved from one location to another

cracklin’: the noise a tree trunk makes as the tree is about to fall

crane wing: the long splinter raised by an axe when it hits a tree trunk at a bad angle when the men are logging

crane wing robber: crane wing

diamond: axe

dingdong: bell that on some of the farms rings the men out in the morning and after lunch

doggin’: working

go my bail: speak up on my behalf

haming: working

hammer: axe

Hannah: the sun

jack: pause in the working

lay: from lay-in, permission to remain in the building during the day

lead row: first worker in a squad

pull-do: bad worker, clumsy worker

Rattler: name for the archetypal tracking hound; it is traditional still to name one hound on each prison Rattler

rider: guard on horseback

robber: see crane-wing robber

Rollin’ it up here, boss: call telling the rider in charge of a squad that one is pausing to roll a cigarette

standing on the rail: a punishment — the offender is made to stand for a number of hours atop a narrow wooden beam

tail row: last man in a work squad; he is often the second best worker in the squad — his function is to keep the slower men in the middle from falling behind

tighten up: work more closely together

— BRUCE JACKSON
Center for Studies in American Culture
State University of New York at Buffalo
with it the songs most complex in melody, lyrics and group involvement. These songs do not time the group, but they do time the individual workers — that is, a worker may work at several paces, depending how he reads the meter, and a half-dozen men singing will not move the same way at the same time. Sometimes the songs are nearly solo blues, sometimes they are very complex choral events.

The black convict work song survived into the early 1960s because the southern penitentiary was a copy of the mid-19th-century plantation (which itself was probably based on African models — there had been nothing like it in British agricultural tradition). The songs lasted until prison reform made them anachronistic. The overt brutality in the fields ended and slow workers were no longer tortured. Heavy machinery became more economical than large labor forces, so many of the field inmates were reassigned to inside jobs and training programs. Younger blacks saw the songs as holdovers from slavery and Uncle Tom days and refused to join the older black men in performing them. Finally, integration, which put white and black inmates in the same work groups, stopped the songs entirely: the whites wouldn’t and couldn’t do them, and the nature of the work was such that if every one

in a group didn’t work in time, no one could.

The genre never moved back outside prison camps because, with the end of non-prison gang labor in the South, there was no occasion for performance; one doesn’t sing a work song in a steel mill and these weren’t songs one would sit around and chant at a bar or on the porch. The songs existed only in connection with a harsh set of social conditions, and once those conditions altered significantly, the songs disappeared entirely.

Recording note:
The groups for cuts 1, 3, 7, 10 and 11 consisted of sixteen workers; the groups for cuts 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9 consisted of four workers; the group for cut 5 consisted of three workers. All songs except “Captain Don’t Feel Sorry” were recorded outdoors in actual work areas with a Uher 4000 tape recorder and an AKG D-19E microphone. “Captain” was recorded indoors with a Tandberg 64 recorder and two AKG D-19E microphones. The master tape was edited in the studios of WGBH-FM (Boston). There is available a 16 mm sound film of some of the songs recorded during the March 1966 field trip, Afro-American Work Songs in a Texas Prison, edited by Dan Seeger (Folklore Research Films) and made by Dan, Peter and Toshi Seeger and myself.

Portions of these notes and transcriptions are from my book, Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Work Songs from Texas Prisons (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1972); those portions and texts are reprinted here with the permission of the publishers, and the President and Fellows of Harvard College.
Text transcriptions and notes to the songs:
(The parenthetical number following the title of each song refers to its location in the book Wake Up Dead Man. If music transcriptions of the version published in this album appear in the book, the entry number is asterisked. An asterisk after a word or expression in the transcriptions indicates that term is defined in the glossary at the end of these notes.)

1. JODY
Benny Richardson and group, crosscutting. Ellis Unit, March 24, 1966 (35-A*)

Jody — the folk character who picks up a man's woman when the man is off somewhere against his will — has figured in tradition for some time. His activities are best described in the long toast called "Jody the Grinder and G.I. Joe." (Versions of this toast are found in Roger D. Abrahams' Deep Down in the Jungle rev. ed. [Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970, 169-170] and my Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, 95-98]. The toast dates from shortly after World War II, but Jody was around earlier. He is named in the brief blues "Joe the Grinder," recorded by John A. Lomax from the singing of Irvin Lowry in Gould, Arkansas, in 1939 (which appears on Afro-American Blues and Songs, Archive of American Folk Song L-14). During the war years Jody figured in the well-known marching chant, "Sound Off," one version of which is printed in Alan Lomax's The Folk Songs of North America (Garden City, N.Y., 1960, 55). Lomax says that, "In many variants this was sung by all Negro outfits in World War II." Woody Guthrie, in an undated note included in Born to Win (edited by Robert Shelton, Macmillan, New York, 1956, 22), says, "The best of marching I saw in my eight months in the army was to the folk words of a folky chant tune that went: Ain't no use in writin' home/Some joker got your gal an' gone./Hey, boy, ya' got left, right?/Ha, boy, ya' got right."

This text is anomalous in the crosscutting repertoire in that the leader sings rhymed couplets. (The only other song with so much rhyme is the version of "Grizzly Bear" on this album, also done by Benny Richardson.) Instead of repeating lines to gain time to think up new lines, as most singers do most of the time, Richardson occasionally introduces a "stall stanza" in which he simply sings the chorus, "Yeah, yeah" for a few lines. Some of the stanzas have a haiku-like brevity and force; the rhymes are not contrived or strained; the melody is love-
I've been working all day long
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Pickin' this stuff called cotton and corn
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

We raise cotton, cane and a-corn
'Tater and tomatoes and a-thing ain't all
Back is weak and I done got tired
Got to tighten up 'just to save my hide

Boss on a horse and he's watchin' us all
Better tighten up, (if you) don't we’ll catch the hall'

Wonder if the major will go my bail'
(Or) give me twelve hours standing on the rail'
Yeah, yeah
Yeah, yeah
I see the captain sittin' in the shade
He don't do nothin' but a he get paid
We work seven long days in a row
Two sacks a Bull' and a picture show
In the wintertime we don't get no lay'
Cuttin' cane and makin' syrups a-every day
When it get wet in the cane field
All the squads work around the old syrup mill
Yeah, yeah.
Yeah, yeah

Gonna settle down for the rest of my life
Get myself a job and get myself a wife
Six long years I've been in the pen
Don't want to come to this place again
Captain and the boss is drivin' us on
Makin' us wish we'd a-stayed at home
If we had listened what our mama say
We wouldn't be cuttin' wood a here today
Yeah, yeah.
Yeah, yeah

We had listened what our mama say
We wouldn't [be] droppin' big timber here today
Yeah, yeah
Yeah, yeah
Push 'em jack', jack, rollin' it up here boss'...
that's a all day long... etc...

2. JULIE
W.D. Alexander and group, logging. Ellis Unit, August 21, 1965 (45')

There is a poignancy to this song that gets lost in print. It is simple and direct. It is about loss and absence, about the woman and child somewhere else, the woman who cannot or will not hear the lonesome calls from the convict whose real sentence is the loss of his youth, the silence of his family. It is Alexander's song, though some of the lyrics are from the general stanzic repertory. I recorded "Julie" on four separate occasions; Alexander sang lead each time.

Julie, hear me when I call you
Julie won't hear me (2x)
B'lieve I'll go to Dallas (2x)
Got to see my Julie
Oh my lordy

Raise 'em up together (3x)
Oh my lordy

Julie, hear me when I call you
Julie and the baby (2x)

Better get the sergeant (3x)
Oh my lordy

My feet is gettin' itchy
Feet is gettin' itchy (2x)
Oh my lordy

Got to see my Julie (3x)
Oh my lordy

Child's gettin' hungry (3x)
Oh my lordy

Rattler can't hold me (3x)
Oh my lordy

Raise 'em little higher (3x)
Oh my lordy

Spoken: One more time
Julie, hear me when I call you

Julie won't hear me (2x)

Julie, Julie won't hear me

Spoken: Water, water

3. **LONG HOT SUMMER DAYS**
Joseph "Chinaman" Johnson and group.
*Blowfishing*, Ellis Unit, March 22, 1966
(59-A*)

The subject matter of this song needs no explanation for anyone who has ever experienced the Texas Gulf country in the bottomlands below Houston in the summertime, the months when heat blasts down from above, rises up from the ground, and seems to ripple horizontally across the fields all at once, the long summer when almost no rain falls but the air stays so humid that nothing dries except when hung in direct sunlight. The sun rises hot and red and goes down hot and red, and temps and temperatures rise at about the same pace. A version of this song by Clyde Hill and group, Brazoria, Texas, was recorded by John A. and Ruby T. Lomax; it appears on *Afro-American Spirituals, Work Songs and Ballads* (AFS L-5).