The Streets of Laredo

Harry Stephens

Harry Stephens has been a vital source of cowboy lore to two generations of collectors. The first encounter is documented in a footnote by John Lomax, Sr.: "One morning in the spring of 1909, Harry leaned over the gate of our home on the campus of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas and called to me: 'Professor, I've come to say good-bye. Grass is a rising and I've got to move on. Remember,' he added as he was leaving, 'I've never seen him since.'"

Fortunately, he turned up again in 1951 in Houston singing more songs in a voice that—wherever he hears it—sings mingled with the chilly winds of an open prairie. In the 40 year interval, he'd wandered cattle on big ranches thru the west, trail-herded from Texas to Idaho, spent a while doing rope tricks on the vaudeville stage, built up a permanent hostility to Indians, and finally settled down to live in Denison, Texas.

All of his songs are about the life he's lived—a night's herdsman stumped in "Little Joe the Wrangler" or an Apache attack in "Billy Venero"—and he sings them with a sense of close, personal identification. As he puts it, "All these songs are signed from some true thing that happened and they make up something about it..."

As I rode out in the streets of Laredo
As I rode out in Laredo one day, I saw a hard sight, 'twas a handsome young cowboy
All wrapped in white linen as cold as the day.

Twice was the saddled one I used to go dressing,
Twice was the saddled one in the snow.

First to the drum-house and then to the card-house,
Got shot in the breast and I'm dying today.

O beat the drum lowly and play the fife slowly.
And play the dead march as you carry me along.

Take me to the green valley and roll sod o'er me,
For I'm a wild cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

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You Gonna' Look Like A Monkey

Dennis Gaines

The idea of it is that everybody round here plays music or makes songs or something. That's white peoples, colored peoples, that's them funny French talking people's, that's everybody what I mean—they all 'em got music.

You see the fact of it is when they go to express what they be feeling or what they be thinking, they liable to produce music out of it.

And that's what it is here. It's all different kinds of the music put down on record so you can hear and know 'bout the things going on. You listen and you know. It's sounding out to give you an understanding.

—LIGHTIN' HOPKINS

TALKING BLUES

JIMMY WOACK

Jimmy Womack is a country boy who came to the big city—bringing with him an immense stock of traditional lore and an inexpressible song-making impulse. Born in Missouri, raised around Shreveport, Louisiana and now a part-time auto mechanic in Houston, his songs are the songs of the big country tradition; from the cloying sentimentalism of "The Letter Edged In Black," to the pro-lynching ballad "Little Mary Phagan," to the Negro derived "Crawdad Song."

Now if you wanna get to heaven, let me tell you how to do it.
Just press your little mustard stunt,
Just slip right over into the devil's hands.
Slide right on to the promised land.

Down in the hen-house, on my knees,
I thought I heard an old chicken sneeze.
It was only the rooster away upstairs,
A helpin' the chicken keep their prayers.

A shortage on the eggs... get more tomorrow.
Now, down in the woods, just a sittin' on a log,
With my finger on the trigger and my gun on the round.
I pulled the trigger and the gun went off.
I grabbed that hog with all my might.

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You Gonna' Look Like A Monkey

Dennis Gaines

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Because the collection of folk ballads does not lend itself to the concept of a single 'writer,' it is unusual for such an artist to open the door and find someone ready to accept a job. As Womack's corollary of Jimmy Womack's impression of the "Jealous Lover" is the classic murder ballad. Unlike the others, it is not linked to actual events, has no geographic references, and is but a distillation of the theme — a ballad that might describe a murderer that happened yesterday or one that happened a century ago.

It has been pointed out that the text has certain parallels with a 19th century English broadside, "The Murder of Betsy Smith," and may have derived from that with an admixture of phrases from a sentimental song, "She Never Blamed Him," which was popular during the Civil War.

A version of the ballad collected in New Hampshire in 1908 (published in JAFL, vol. 22) is very much like the present text. Numerous other versions — some entitled "Florellia" or other such names — are to be found in Belden's Ballads and Songs; Randolph's O'Carroll Folksongs, Vol. 11; Owens' Texas Folk Songs; Brown's North Carolina Folkslore; and Hudson's Folksongs of Mississippi, representing those collected in 16 states, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Canada.

James (Ironhead) Baker, an inmate at Central Farm Prison, was recorded by Maie McComb, recorded by Lomax, and recorded by Pete Seeger. Ramsey State Farm, Oney, Texas, March 17, 1951.

Yellow gal songs go back to slavery times and early minstrel types: Yaller gal look and tryin to keep you out o' reach, Be done done done, overseer hollering loud — , By, my name, my name. And as Leadbelly's lines on the subject indicate, they are invariably characterized as a source of trouble: A yaller woman keepin you worried all the time. A yaller woman shaken man gone blind. Although E. C. Perret has published Yaller gal verses from Mississippi and Dorothy Scarborough has collected a number of them in Texas, this particular song appears to be pretty much the property of the Negro convicts in the Texas prison farms. James (Ironhead) Baker, an inmate at Central Farm, recorded the version published in American Ballads, Folk Songs and Hymns (Lead Belly) Ledbetter's recording of it is in the Library of Congress files and on Folkways LP 242 and Stinson LP 19. The Lomax book comments that this is one of the few folk songs about women in the lips of Negro men that have any element of tenderness. K.C. AIN'T NOTHING BUT A RAG ANDREW EVERTT

There's a huge knot of muscle beneath the deep-brown skin of Andrew Everett's forearm. It quietly pulses with the rhythm as he picks and thumbs his warped, paint-scarred old Stella guitar, plentiful evidence of his hard-scrubbing life in tarpurine camps, railroad gangs and sugar refineries. "Sometimes I be out in the woods singing — you could hear me two, three miles, but now I got the place I can't hardly sing, can't hardly do nothing..." Everett's music is crude, individualistic, and his tuning completely his own. It is not for the casual listener but only for those who can listen as if with Everett's own ears, hearing the reflections of a life-time of freight car loading, lumbering, and track lining.

Andrew Everett, guitar solo, Recorded by Mark McCormick, Houston, 1959.

Ed Badeaux learned this song from a housewife who failed to teach him, or did not know, a verse which G. Legman has described as the "rare verse of wonderfully graphic detail" which would have properly come between the fourth and fifth verses sung here.

Once an inhabitant of the English music hall stage, two world wars have put this ballad into world wide circulation and it is published in those books which make some sense, though weak attempt to document the traditions of seamen and soldiers as Niles' Songs My Mother Never Taught Me, Shay's Iron Men and Wooden Ships (which includes a closely related version of "Home, Dearie, Home"), and Palmer's G.I. Songs. A corruption popularized by tin pan alley in 1945 entitled "Bell Bottom Trousers" obscured the ballad's intended racism. An analogous ballad, "The Trooper and the Maid" (Child #299), was an earlier immigrant to America, collected in Sharp's English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians.

CORRINE, CORRINA

LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS

Sam Hopkins — the only major recording artist included in this set — is a celebrity who strangely resists being the center of attention. There has always been some reluctance to overcome in setting up his most recent recording sessions (those which produced the "77" and Heritage LP's in England and the Tradition LP's in the U.S.). By contrast, he is usually eager to help others to record, often lending himself as accompanist and giving song ideas to older singers. He has been responsible for his various proteges — L. C. Williams, Luke Miles, Ruth Ames — making their first records. In a sense, he is repaying his own debt to the various blues singers, notably Texas Alexander and Blind Lemon Jefferson, who gave Lightnin' what he calls the "idea of it."

When Lightnin' learned of this recording project, he appointed himself talent scout and over a period of many months, it was not unusual to open the door and find someone with a guitar or harmonica saying, "Lightnin' said come here and make some songs."

This world is the intense community song making spirit of Lightnin's east Texas home where, as he puts it, "They
and not of the scholars, Terry's "Tell Me Baby", Savoy LP 14016.

**Verse forms:** which float in and out of both songs. Probably with "See See Rider" as is suggested by the Decca 8633; Leadbelly's "Black Girl (In The Material - bears the names "Baby, Please Don't Go" and "Deep Ellum Crawdad Song" it is sung by both white and Negro country people, is part of the jazzman's entertainers, hillbilly bands, etc.

Although it is connected to the folk as one of those that the folklorists have yet to "discover" it. It is not published in any of the general anthologies and is not included in records produced for the folk music public. Like several others included in this set - "Baby, Please Don't Go" and "Deep Ellum Blues" - it is still the property of the people and not of the scholars.

The song is equally well known in different versions.

**THE MILLER BOY**

**JOHN Q. ANDERSON**

John Anderson was born in 1916 in the Texas panhandle. His parents had settled there after leaving the Indian Territory — "The Nation" — that is now eastern Oklahoma. It was an isolated community of which he says, "People there were ranchers, farmers and cowboys. Social activities included square dances, pic suppers, singing schools... songs were passed down by word of mouth from the older to the younger, no one thought of them as folksongs because no one knew what folk songs were."

"It was a tradition in my family, in fact, that a child by the time he was eight or nine would be able to sit in with the family group and chord on the mandolin, and then when he was a little older and his fingers longer, he was expected to play the guitar. My father and older brother played the fiddle. As a consequence, we played for numerous square dances."

Happy was the miller boy,
Lived by the mill.
The mill turned around by its own free will,Hand on the hooper, the other on the sack—Ladies step forward and gents step back.

Happy was the miller boy,
Lived by the mill.
The mill turned around by its own free will,Hand on the hooper, the other on the sack—Hold to your partners and turn right back.

Happy was the miller boy,
Lived by the mill;The mill turned around by its own free will,Hand on the hooper, the other on the sack—Ladies to the center and the gents fly the track.

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Recorded November, 1959, College Station, Texas.

"The Miller Boy" — widely known square dance call has been included in Randolph's Ozark Folksongs.

John Anderson learned it in his community where some religious people had prejudices against dancing but permitted their children to play "swinging games". Since musical instruments were not allowed, the music and rhythm for the play-parties was furnished by one or two hand-clapping singers. Anderson recalls having sung at such gatherings of ten or so children, at five or six hours on end and recites this song as a favorite because it was a "cheating" in which extra boys could attempt to get a girl away from her partner.

**CRYIN' WON'T MAKE ME STAY**

**R. C. FOREST & GOZY KILPARK**

Like many guitar players, R. C. Forest's intent is to center his attention, to attract the suggestive glances of women, to cajole tips to support his wine drinking. Except when he's in the City Hospital recovering from "the fevers and trembles", he spends his time sleeping till midday, uses his afternoons sprawled on his porch — just off West Dallas Street — engaged in small talk and romance with passersby, and in the evening prows the neighborhood bars:

I'm goin', yes, I'm goin'...And your cryin' won't make me stay,Cause the more I hear you, the more I like you;The further I'm goin', the better.

Yeah, my mama she done told me,And my papa told me too,But I'm not no friend to you.Son, that woman that you got,Ain't no friend to you.

Beneath my back home,Fell down on my bended knees,Got my name and my papa,Gonna forgie you, I promise.

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Recorded by Mack McCormick, March 1959, Houston.

"The Miller Boy" — widely known square dance call has been included in Randolph's Ozark Folksongs.

There are recent recordings of it as "I'm Going Away" by Leroy Dallas, Sittin' in With 526; and as "Gonna Leave You Baby" by Roy Milton.

**THE BALLAD OF DAVY CROCKETT**

**MRS. METLON**

Mrs. Melton is just what she sounds like — a little, old lady with a sharp temper and a ready wit to keep young upstarts in their places. When asked to say something by way of introduction to her song, she answered, "Well, I didn't have anything to say about it except that I was just going to sing it."
This is another song known to folklorists, widely known to the folk. It has been sung by most of the Negro artists represented in this "Another Man Done Gone" which probably are frequently mentioned in many blues. Moreover, its setting Lightnin' Hopkins, Dennis Gainus, R. C. Forest, Gid Tanner, Joel Hopkins, and Andrew Everett, can be assumed to be equally familiar to singers in every hamlet and village through the South. Moreover, its tune is the same as that of the eloquent "Another Man Done Gone" which probably goes back to slavery times.

The towns mentioned however, are usually four: New Orleans, St. Augustine (Texas or Florida?), Parchman Farm, Mississippi, and Baltimore — places which for reason of individual significance or flavor of the sound are frequently heard mentioned in many blues.

The musicians here are uncertain as to when they first began playing this although they felt it was learned after they moved to Texas.

YOU GONNA LOOK LIKE A MONKEY

DENNIS GAINUS

Dennis Gainus is from Crockett, Texas. To the west of his home lies the black-soil cotton lands and their huge tenant—system plantations, and to the east is the Davy Crockett National Forest and the piney woods, sawmills, and turpentine camps. In this region is concentrated a musical heritage in which "they all grew up and learned to play music". Both early and recent "hillbilly" artists — Bob Wills, Al Dexter, and Moon Mullican to name only a few — have come from the region in a steady stream, owing a great deal to the Negro tradition in such recordings as "New Milk Cow Blues", "Fan It", and "Trouble In Mind."

Dennis tells of street singers he's seen in the area, such as Blind Willie Johnson in Madisonville, Blind Lemon Jefferson in Palestine, Tarbox Alexander in Crockett, and Lightnin' Hopkins, "a young scamp who was all over the place with them older ones."

In Dennis' memory there is an even more fascinating figure, a Mexican known by the name of Seville: "He was there when I was born and he was old then. He came from Mexico and he brought with him a guitar with 12 strings. They say he was the first man to be around playing such a guitar and he taught it to a whole bunch of others. He come from Mexico and he brought with him this guitar and they say he brought the boll weevil too. He used to make guitars and sell 'em to those who wanted to learn. He made me my first guitar. It was 12 strings and then later I got this one I wore out the first."

The song may derive from a Tin Pan Alley composition popular in 1930 — or that song may derive from a folk song. At any rate, the song is now in traditional circulation. Alex Robert, one of the Zydeco band members, says he still frequently plays it and hears it from others.

Dennis Gainus learned the song in east Texas but can't recall the date.
Belle Hafti is a young grandmother who delights the neighborhood children in the early evening with songs recalled from her own childhood in Cross City, Florida. It's a minor tradition for the children on the block, the younger of her three boys and her grandson, to gather around her porch and sing along in songs like "The Cockoo" and "Once There Was a Fisherman." She married at the age of 17 and shortly thereafter came to Houston - in 1936 - and has lived in the city since.

"Soldier, soldier, will you marry me," with your musket, file, and drum!

"Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry thee.
For I have no coat to put on."

Then up she went to her grandfather's chest, and got him a shirt of the very, very best.
And the soldier put it on.

"Soldier, soldier, will you marry me," with your musket, file, and drum!

"Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry thee.
For I have no shoe to put on."

Then up she went to her grandfather's chest, and got him a pair of the very, very best.
And the soldier put them on.

"Soldier, soldier, will you marry me," with your musket, file, and drum!

"Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry thee.
For I have no hat to put on."

Then up she went to her grandfather's chest, and got him a hat of the very, very best.
And the soldier put it on.

"Soldier, soldier, will you marry me," with your musket, file, and drum!

"Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry thee.
For I have no gloves to put on."

Then up she went to her grandfather's chest, and got him a pair of the very, very best.
And the soldier put them on.

"Soldier, soldier, will you marry me," with your musket, file, and drum!

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And the soldier put it on.

"Soldier, soldier, will you marry me," with your musket, file, and drum!

"Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry thee.
For I have no shoe to put on."

Then up she went to her grandfather's chest, and got him a shoe of the very, very best.
And the soldier put them on.

"Soldier, soldier, will you marry me," with your musket, file, and drum!

"Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry thee.
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"Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry thee.
For I have no gloves to put on."

Then up she went to her grandfather's chest, and got him a pair of the very, very best.
And the soldier put them on.
old bosses look you over with their eyes half closed, and sniff dried in the corners of their mouths. Hell, they know you if you are a Negro. Nearly all these 'demented' bosses on Ramsey Farm are from one community — Madisonville, Texas. And most of them are kinfolk — either by marriage or blood.

Since the gulf of Mexico, it never really gets cold for more than three days. The chief crops are corn, sugar cane, and cotton. They grow enough corn to feed 400 convicts for four or five months, to ship to the main unit in Huntsville and feed the 400 milage. By the beginning of October, they are picking cotton. Then from November to February, they're cutting cane to make hundreds of gallons of syrup and thousands of sacks of raw sugar in the Factory.

"If you were unfortunate enough to be handling a pair of mules which got scared and bolted and knocked down some cane shoots, you'd be in trouble. Or if you happen to leave some Johnson grass roots in hoing a field, if you are made to pluck up the grass, blade by blade, with your bare hands. Then when you return to "bar racks" after fifteen hours of work, you are made to stand on a barrel or put on the "cuffs".

"This means you are placed on a narrow bench with your feet straight out and your hands behind you. Handcuffs are then snapped on. Sometimes convicts' wrists swell so much they lose the use of their hands. You have to have a friend to help you get the just the same — or else be bludgeoned to insensibility. They have a grave yard all of their own there, and it must be running over with Negro bodies."

In these circumstances, song is a way of survival.

1. Quoted from an article by Jack Lee as told to Our World magazine.

The Negro's songs often make reference to the old plantation life, the black man's prison, the sugar mill, and even to the "gator tail" meat. Some of these appear in the "Godamighty Blues" and "The Godamighty Blues Song" — and included several of his own making like "I Don't Believe She'd Know Me" and started everyone with a rewriting of "John Henry" set in prison terms:

"Henry John said to the Captain, 'Well, there's the yard, ain't a thing up and down this line.' Mean, that's too hard.

Explaining the song "Here, Rattler, Here" he said, "We made that song up, because we have a dog man, who, if you escape, he gets after you. The boys make up songs about him in the woods, where he lives."

The ritual bear hunt is dramatized in man's oldest portrait of himself, the paleolithic cave paintings such as at Trois Ferres. In other, even older caves, man once lived in some kind of a group with his friends, with families of bears and before he began ceremonial burying of his own dead, he had begun burying the dead of the bears, their bones carefully arranged and betokened in their graves.

Among the Alabama Indians of the United States these songs sum up what has been Federally deposited to a government reservation a few miles north of Houston — a myth that has fire once belonged to the bears and on one occasion when they were away searching acorns, man stole it and ever since fire has belonged to man.

In the contemporary art of Ingmar Bergman's film Sawdust And Tinsel (The Naked Night) the circus owner's rebellion against circumstances ends with his killing of a bear that resembles himself.

In myths and fairy tales the bear is the traditional totem of the evil mother. "Grizzly Bear" seems to contain parallels to all these images, and yet on another level, is going far beyond the obvious sexual and homosexual relationships of the convicts themselves. Given this interpretation, it's merely another form of the old, real homosexuality, (called "Wolf" by white convicts, "Bear" by Negroes), of the dormitory. Since conjugal visits have been forbidden, there are, of course, been no sudden celibacy but rather a booming homosexuality in the prisons.

But the Grizzly Bear never remains any one thing. In the three different versions of the song "Bottle Up and Go," one is "a great big ugly . . ." or "he had big blue eyes . . ." or "Jack O'Diamonds was a great big Grizzly Bear" or "The Captain is a great big Grizzly Bear" or "He laid tracks in the bottom like a gator tail". The song has apparently never been collected before the 1951 visits to the prison — though it was at that time widely known at both Ramsey and Retreat — though it seems to have started in an earlier work song sung in the prisons:

"George went a-hunting in the morning, He killed an eagle . . ."