HIGH WATER BLUES
Field recordings of Mississippi and Louisiana Blues 1965/70.

SIDE 1
Isaiah Chatman (vcl/gtr)
Cold In Hand
L.V. Conely (vcl/gtr)
Hard Headed Woman
L.V. Conely (vcl/hec)
High Water
John Henry ‘Bubba’ Brown (vcl/gtr)
Melvin Brown (gtr)
Sister Kate
John Henry ‘Bubba’ Brown (vcl/gtr)
Cortina (trad.)
Fiddlin’ Joe Martin (vcl/gtr)
Good Morning Little Schoolgirl (trad.)
Woodrow Adams (vcl/gtr); Curtis Allen (gtr)
Fiddlin’ Joe Martin (dms)
Pony Blues (trad.)

Baton Rouge La. 18 Aug. 1966
Franklinton La. 31 Aug. 1965
Franklinton La. 26 Aug. 1966
Los Angeles Ca. 9 Sept. 1967
Los Angeles Ca. 9 Sept. 1967
Robinsonville Miss. 29 Aug. 1967
Robinsonville Miss. 30 Aug. 1967

In the last ten years I’ve recorded hundreds of blues by dozens of performers in Mississippi and Louisiana and some of the other southern states. Some of these artists, like Roosevelt Holts and Jack Owen, I was able to record extensively, and have presented complete LP’s of their work. But there were many others who only recorded a handful of good songs for me. In some cases they were out of practice and could only get a few pieces together for me when I showed up unexpectedly with my tape recorder. Others simply wandered into sessions I was conducting, played or sat in on a few pieces, and wandered out again. There were many who wanted to play more pieces but just didn’t fit into my research design at the time, and there were even a few that I wanted to record at length but was unable to because of lack of time and money. I’ve selected for this record the best blues from some of these artists that I met only briefly some years ago. These are all, in my opinion, fine performances, and I wish now that I had been a little more persistent or stayed an extra day to record more from these men. I didn’t think then that in a few years three of them would be dead and that I might never again see the others. But if I never do, they have all left vivid impressions with me of their personality and their music, and I hope that I can share some of these impressions in this album.

Isaiah Chatman (known to his friends as “Bab”, i.e. “Brother”) is one of those that can’t be recorded again. He was brutally murdered around 1970 as the result of a domestic problem. He was a good friend of Robert Pete Williams and lived just across the highway from him in Baton Rouge’s predominantly black Scotlandville section. I was staying at Robert Pete’s, and Bab came over one afternoon to record. I remember him as a quiet, modest man, who downplayed his own considerable talent and wanted me instead to record Silas Hogan’s band, in which he was the rhythm guitarist and an occasional-vocalist. It’s too bad he never got a chance to lead his own band on record. Chatman learned guitar in his native Norwood, Le, but was most influenced by Jimmy Reed, whom he met and played with in Gary, Indiana, in 1948. It was probably Chatman who was largely responsible for introducing Reed’s characteristic wailing voice to the Baton Rouge blues scene upon his return there in 1953. His “Cold In Hand” starts in an unusual free rhythm but eventually settles into a twelve-bar pattern with a regular beat and evolves into an adaptation of Muddy Waters’ “Blow, Wind, Blow.”

L.V. Conely is one of those bluesmen that you can easily forget you recorded until you listen again to your tapes of him in the comfort and calm setting of your own home. He always seemed to show up with a crowd of his drinking buddies when I was recording someone else in his home town of Franklin, Louisiana. His friends, who could also play various instruments, were always too drunk to record anything worthwhile, and it was in this context of frustration that I tended to overlook the few fine performances that Conely recorded. Although not a professional musician, he has played local engagements with guitarist/pianist Eseaut Weary in recent years and at one time played gospel guitar in New Orleans with the legendary Rev. Utah Smith. He can still play Smith’s complex style note for note. “Hard Headed Woman” comes from my first recording session “In the field”, and I’ll never forget it. It was in the home of a local bootlegger, and while the others were drinking wine and playing blues, the bootlegger was sitting at his front window with his rifle aimed at the white policeman patrolling across the street, cursing him under his breath. Fortunately, my career as a blues researcher was not aborted at that time, and I’ve never found myself in such a dangerous situation since. Conely’s songs often deal with the cycle of poverty, hopelessness, and the instability of marital relationships (although he himself is a family man), “Hard Headed Woman”, although it ends on an optimistic note, conveys these themes well, as Conely sings:

Tell me a hard headed woman study evil all the time. Tell me a hard headed woman study evil all the time. Well, they leave you broke and disgraced, standing on the corner and you broke and ain’t got a dime.

“High Water”, on which his crmonies can be heard offering him encouragement during his performance, mixes autobiographical and “stream of consciousness” approaches to the blues. I never could get him to tell me for sure whether he actually experienced the Tupelo, Mississippi, flood which John Lee Hooker also popularised in a blues record. In any case, Conely offers a more personalized set of lyrics than Hooker as he sings:

That’s when the panic caught me. That was in Nineteen Thirty-Four. Well, I got so hungry one time, I took all of my children, I had to go...”

The song vividly brings the themes of poor education, childhood poverty and hunger, hard times, the dullest work of share cropping, Southern white paternalism, and racism, which have been all to much a part of the life of many black people in America.

Highway 61 ran right by Woodrow Adams’ door out in the country near Robinsonville, Mississippi, a town in the Delta that has at one time been the home of such blues greats as Robert Johnson, Son House, Willie Brown, and Howlin’ Wolf. Adams had made a few commercial records before I met him, but I believe these recordings, made in his home while his wife was in another room in the last stages of pregnancy, are his best. Adams is a tall crane-like man, who hoovers over the microphone when he blows harp. I sensed in him a suppressed genius. More than any other possession were two battered tape recorders on which he created full ensemble blues by playing a variety of instruments in succession and using primitive overdubbing techniques. Although they sounded to me like something from another planet, he insisted with obvious pride that I make dub of these marvels of technological achievement. His two pieces on this record are more earth-bound and have him in the company of his regular band, Curtis Allen on guitar and Fiddlin’ Joe on drums. By using lots of reverb from his amplifier, Allen manages to get both a full base and treble effect from a single guitar. Martin contributes the flavour of real jive joint performances with his shouted encouragement and clapping-pounding drum style. Later in the session he got drunk on white lightnin’ and passed out in the middle of a song, causing the drum set to come crashing down to the floor with him. Adams is a spontaneous versifier who likes to remold old blues themes and delivers a spare but very effective and sensitive melodic line in both his singing and instrumental work. His “How Long” uses a theme first popularized by Leroy Carr in 1928 but probably derived more directly from Howlin’ Wolf, who recorded a version in 1954. Adams used to follow behind Wolf in the 1940’s and was greatly influenced by his style of blues. On “Pony Blues”, another Wolf recording from 1948 Adams switches to guitar, playing bottleneck in standard tuning. His playing style still shows some influence from his first instrument, a single strand of wire on the side of a wall fretted with a bottleneck.

Fiddlin’ Joe Martin began playing drums on a suggestion from Howlin’ Wolf after he badly burned his left hand when the gas tank of a tractor caught on fire. Before this he had been an outstanding string band musician, playing guitar, mandolin, and bass fiddle. His earliest instrument was a slide trombone which he learned to play from sheet music in a school band in the all-black Delta town of Mount Bayou. I did manage to record this nice version of “Good Morning, Little Schoolgirl!” with guitar from him despite his disability and other factors unfavourable to successful recording. I vividly remember his wife’s frequently expressed fears that...
I was going to spirit her husband away to Chicago to play drums with Howlin' Wolf. Besides this, the noise of children, and the rumble of trucks on the highway in front of his house, there were frequent visits from the local white folks offering friendly advice to Joe on which of the various racists he could waste his newly acquired right to vote on in the election that day. Joe learned this song from Memphis Minnie with whom he played off and on for many years in various towns in Mississippi, Memphis, and Chicago. The song itself derives from a Sonny Boy Williamson record from 1937, although Minnie was known to have used the melody and guitar part.

Boogie Bill Webb's "Seven Sisters Blues" is set in Algiers, Louisiana, the stronghold of voodoo in the United States and just across the Mississippi River from Webb's home of New Orleans. The song is loosely based on Johnnie Temple's 1937 recording of "Hoodoo Woman" and localized to Louisiana. The Seven Sisters were probably one woman, a "seventh sister" (from the widespread belief that a seventh son or daughter will have supernatural or psychic powers). This woman in Algiers had a house with seven rooms and would send her clients into each in succession while appearing to them in seven different guises. Her fame inspired imitation "Seven Sisters" in Alabama, Virginia, and South Carolina, as well as "Seven Brothers" in New York. Webb's odd first line, "I'm going to swim the river to Algiers, Louisiana, just to see how the Seven Sisters died," is an adaptation of one of Temple's original verses about Aunt Caroline Dyer, another well known fortune teller from Newport, Arkansas.

Webb's guitar playing and possibly the piece itself were learned from Bubba Brown, whom I found in California on a tip from Webb. He was one of the best and most modern guitarists in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1930's and 1940's. He could easily have made records, but he didn't want to travel and lose his job, which he held for thirty years. When I met him in Los Angeles, where he had moved after his retirement, he had given up guitar and wanted me instead to listen to his son Melvin, who has made several records as a mazz guitarist. We compromised, and I recorded the two together on "Sister Kate", a composition of the New Orleans jazz violinist Armand J. Pire, "Corianna", with its allusions to World War I, was popularized in 1928 by Bo Carter and Charlie McCoy, two other bluesmen from Jackson.

Brown told me about his old partner in Jackson, Gary Lee Simmons, and I managed to record him there a year or two before he died. Simmons was so excited that I had to come to see him that he could barely play. He spent most of the evening trying to get the guitar in tune and calling friends and relatives on the phone to come over and join us. The session broke up when his half brother arrived drunk and insisted onfooling around with the guitar for the rest of the evening. But I did manage to record a couple of fine blues from Simmons, one of which was "Doodleville Blues", a joint composition by him and Bubba Brown. Doodleville is a section of Jackson in which Simmons was living. The piece is unusual because all the lines have the same ending rhyme.

Houston Stackhouse is one of the last travelling bluesmen in the South. I ran into him in his old home town of Crystal Springs, Mississippi, where he was playing with some other local musicians. Stackhouse has played with most of the Mississippi blues greats, including Tommy Johnson, Charley Patton, Robert Johnon, Elmore James, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Robert Nighthawk, to name just a few. Strangely enough, he has always stood in their shadows and did not have any original blues compositions when I met him in 1967. He has always had a vast repertoire, however, and plays in a variety of styles. "Return Mail" was a hit for Robert Nighthawk in 1949. Nighthawk learned his bottleneck style from Stackhouse (although its ultimate inspiration was probably Tampa Red), but here the teacher mimics the pupil, adding a little jazz style picking. The complex standard-tuning bottleneck playing is beautiful, however, and Stackhouse must be recognized as one of the last bearers, and a very worthy one, of an old blues tradition, now that most of his former playing partners have died off. On "Talkin' Bout You" Stackhouse reverts to his first instrument, the harmonica, and shows that he can play it just as well as the guitar, although he rarely features it. This beautifully integrated band performance was a double-sided hit (with "Bumble Bee") for Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe in 1930. Toward the end of the piece Stackhouse can be heard singing with his band members. Ditty Mason lived in Crystal Springs and played there with Stackhouse on his visits until Mason's death in 1969 in a car-train collision on the way home from a party.

The Taylor Brothers were still performing blues when I last saw them in 1973, although Willis Taylor had suffered a stroke that weakened his left hand. Their performances are strange combinations of intense blues and humor with each man alternating as straight man and clown, creating a tension that perhaps only two brothers could produce. Both pieces feature the singing of Charlie Taylor and the instrumental skills of Willis. His violin on "I Got the Blues" is, he says, inspired by the playing of Lonnie Chatman of the old Mississippi Sheiks, but it is much rougher and "bluer". On "Midnight Blues" Willis adapts the piano part of the traditional "44 Blues" to the guitar while Charlie sings that piece's melody. His lyrics on both pieces here are improvised but draw heavily on traditional phrases of the blues.

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David Evans
All compositions by artists concerned unless stated otherwise.
Front Cover Photo: Painting by Lester Willis, cousin of the Taylor Bros., taken by Cheryl Evans.

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