The irony in Freddie Spruell's comment: "Sure as you 'preciate my death", is still being mined by blues researchers who, then unborn, have come up against a solid wall of mystery in their efforts to secure pertinent information. Although Spruell had been, and is still, listed in the Chicago telephone directory, his widow had fended off all inquiry for years before revealing the lone fact that he died June 19th, 1956. No death certificate was located in the Cook County Clerk's office, posing the thought that Spruell either passed on way back down home or Chicago's civil servants are incompetent beyond belief.

A sorry fate indeed to accord the man who holds the distinction of being the first delta bluesman to make a record. For Spruell, who recorded almost 2 years before Tommy Johnson and 3 years before either Charlie Patton or Garfield Akers, very likely had some link with them which might have extended our knowledge of the early delta styles. Already settled in Chicago by 1926, the date of his first session, it is not hard to conceive of his being involved in the music scene at Drew, Dockery's plantation, or perhaps Hernando, Mississippi. Spruell appears to have had two basic tunes, one in A and one in E, that he continually revamped in much the same way as Charlie Patton, although lacking Patton's breadth and incomparable rhythm - but not his force. However, his repertoire probably extended beyond the recorded examples we have; he played in the key of C on "Let's Go Riding" and more than likely knew arrangements different from those presented here.

A typically, he favored a twelve-string guitar, not at all characteristic of a delta or Mississippi bluesman as far as recorded evidence is concerned. Also, for a Mississippian he was rather original in his lyrics, although his themes were fairly predictable. With the exception of "Kokomo", which nevertheless receives a lyrically original treatment, none of his songs have any other discernable source. Despite recording for three different companies (over a 10 year time span) at a time when blues records were selling at a small but fairly comfortable rate, his records appear to have sold exceedingly poorly. If biographically an enigma, a fairly accurate musical portrait can be conjectured of Mister Freddie Spruell.

The key of A seems to have brought out Spruell's most exciting and inspired vocals, and Muddy Water Blues and Way Back Down Home from his earliest session employ it. Both are variations upon the same tune, the latter bearing a strong similarity to the style of Garfield Akers, with a slight difference in rhythm. Unusual to Muddy Water is the vocal which is not related to the accompaniment in a truly immediate way. The vocal uses terse, sharply cut rhythms and a subliminal changing melody intensely related to itself as the song progresses, but not relating on a not to note or beat to beat basis with the guitar - only on a phrase-wise basis.

Low Down Mississippi Bottom Man appears to have been commercially Spruell's largest success (by virtue of the half-dozen copies extant) and his archetypal piece in E. Lyrically, it serves to further the stereotype of the blues artist as a despicable rounder, who does nothing but drink and barrelhouse. Listen to the "malingering", hammering base, generally only sparsely punctuating the verse, but in several brilliant variations changing the mood of the piece by bringing the thumbed bass up into the main action of the accompaniment. This action is a series of descending chords in the D7 shape coming down in four single steps to the tonic in this case, E. Tommy Johnson used the same progression in A for his "Big Fat Mama" as did Kid Bailey in a piece called, interestingly enough, "Mississippi Bottom Blues". Charlie Patton also used several closely related runs, specifically in "Moon Going Down". Spruell's heavy touch is especially noticeable in the force with which he strokes the strings. A part of Spruell's unique sound comes from the fact that he always hits several strings in his bass. On a twelve-
string, this means that at least four different strings are hit, creating a more or less atonal and purely rhythmic effect.

What fortunate circumstance paired Spruell with the East Coast guitar player, Carl Martin, who is virtually certain to be the second guitar on the 1935 session, is beyond explanation. To be expected, Martin has no recollection of the date or of Mr. Freddie. The addition of this second guitar, stylistically quite removed from Mississippi, further enhances Spruell's 12-string while adding a sparkling vitality.

Don't Cry Baby sees both artists in the key of A, and exhibits the most relentless drive in the Spruell canon. If this is a revamping of the "Muddy Water" theme, the accenting is so different as to transmute it completely. Lyrical the most limited of his pieces, it is emotionally the most forceful. Spruell's part is superbly self-limited, in the style of a Kansas Joe, leaving Martin to do a number of nice melodic things in a higher register. Note that Spruell throws in a strange change in the 10th bar, and that Martin appears to be playing very Spruellish runs. The total effect lends the impression of there being more than two guitars on this cut, as if Charlie Jordan was in there somewhere.

The remaining three sides from Spruell's 1935 session are all reworkings of "Low Down Mississippi Bottom Man" at various tempos, with Martin's six-string guitar in E as well as Spruell's twelve-string. 4A Highway, taken at moderate speed, has Spruell getting into a wonderful series of long, strong bass runs relieved only by a sparse but subtly rhythmic insertion of chords into the fine runs of Carl Martin. 4A Highway was, once upon a time, the main highway out of Joliet, cutting through the black section and passing the penitentiary.

Your Good Man Is Gone is a delightful piece of morbidity unsurpassed by even Walter Vincent's fascination with cemeteries (STOP AND LISTEN, Mamlish S-3804). Mississippians seemed to have favored death motifs a bit more than usual (Son House, Willie Harris, the Mississippi Sheiks). The pace in keeping with its subject matter, is a bit slower than a shuffle, with fine lead guitar by Martin and some heavy syncopations in the bass by Spruell.

Mr. Freddie's Kokomo Blues is surely Spruell's most vital piece in the key of E, with Martin doing a lot of note stretching and showing an uncanny accuracy of pitch and picking. Unlike most covers of Kokomo Arnold's popular revamping of a 1920's blues, and not excluding Arnold's, Spruell thematically develops the idea, instead of just employing the use of the city in the chorus. Iconoclastically, he knocks Kokomo as being "no great large city" and centers on its true attraction: vice. "You can break 'em down both night and day and won't be bothered and grieved with no law." The inclusion and development of a nursery rhyme in the closing stanzas is rather startling for a country blues.

(BH note: this compilation also inc. items by Otto Virgial, Charlie Patton, Tommy Bradley and Long Cleve Reed/Hull.)
In the 60s Gayle Dean Wardlow did report to Blues Unlimited that he'd contacted a disinterested widow. Nearly two decades later (1981) she was more forthcoming and in 1990 GDW supplied the following to 78 Quarterly (Vol.1, issue 5, p 90-1):

FREDDIE SPRUELL - One of the first self-accompanied guitarists to record, Spruell lived in Chicago when he made his debut for OKeh Records in 1926. Although his musicianship had a decidedly Southern slant, it was apparently developed in the North. "Freddie was only a boy when he moved to Chicago with his parents", his widow recalled in 1981. Formerly, he had lived in Lake Providence, Louisiana, the one-time residence of Blind Joe Reynolds. "When I met him in the late '20s, he was already makin' records," she said. Apparently seeking to enlarge his reputation, he told her that he was the composer of Mr. Freddie Blues, which was originally recorded by Priscilla Stewart in the summer of 1924, and credited to her piano-playing accompanist, who later recorded as Freddie Shayne. Spruell's secular musical career ended by the end of World War II: "The last thing he played for I knew about, was his mother's birthday...She asked him to stop playin' (blues), and he did it after that. She wanted him to go back into the church, and he did. That's why he quit playing the blues and started preaching." She added: "He was preaching by 1945. He was a Baptist...But he didn't preach that much and didn't play in church." Spruell, she said, died in 1956 after a lengthy hospital stay. "He died in Chicago," she said. Yet, no local death certificate for Spruell appears to exist.