MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
PRESENTS
JAILHOUSE BLUES
Women's a cappella songs from the Parchman Penitentiary
Library of Congress field recordings, 1936 and 1939
This is not a collection of songs reflecting the lives of all Black women in the South. Most Black Southern women do not do time in Parchman Penitentiary. The prison experience scars a life and can bend a spirit in ways we who have never been forced to breathe that air can never know. We can know something of these Black women in the songs they sing, the way they sing, and the way they select from the traditional repertoire. For those of us who have studied and enjoyed blues, especially the Delta Blues, the melodies will be familiar. Many of the stock verses are favored by others whose names we know and records we buy and if we are old enough, lucky enough whose concerts we have attended. However there are some verses that are truly of a woman’s experience. You have to have been a little girl walking down a dirt road to school every morning to understand the terror in these lines in Rickelest Superintendant:

It was early one morning I was on my way to school,
Some grey-headed man, and he broke my mama’s rule.

Or the verses crying about the exhaustion of streetwalking for survival:

So tired of rolling for my shoes and clothes.

Anybody Here Wants to Buy Some Cabbage? (brownskin) could be considered a streetwalker’s vendor song. It was created for a Christmas Day show in Colored Minstrel style in 1938 in the women’s camp of Parchman. “Too heavy on my belly” or “I got it” are phrases in those songs one would never hear in the open, but it is an inside laughing, giggling, risque song about sexual explorations.

Whether the verses are stock prison, blues, love, work, living, or verses illuminating the experiences of Black women, it is important to understand that the songs that these women sing are owned by them in the way they use them to name themselves and speak articulately about their condition.

This is the room where the portable recording equipment was set up.

The women stewed everything that was used in the prison, including thousands of men’s overalls.

In Make The Devil Leave Me Alone, I find that wonderful way in which Black American singing must be sung speech. Being conversational in phrasing is the most difficult thing for a young singer to learn. One must have an ease about the voice, almost as if the singing is not so much the point. The major issue is to free the text and let it ride a loose, easy airway. The technique is to move up above speech to singing while staying in a conversational relationship with those gathered. What’s beautiful about the singing of Mary James and those voices with her is that this principle is stripped to its clearest statement as most of these songs become excellent singing scenes. One can hear every nuance and inflection in the voice, and everything is important, the word sounds, enunciation, pacing, and especially the endings. The lines end with a lifting moan sweeping down, up and then the pause to the ending sound. All of this done in the same time as a note ending would take, but with this sweep, is the point. Locked up in this ending is the feeling about not being bothered by the devil that is beyond words.

Matie Mae Thomas in Dangerous Blues provides us with a brilliant, solo accompanied line of a classic Delta blues melody. The kind that’s just one step away from the field holler. And one value of this collection of unaccompanied songs is that we get to hear revealed wonderful relationships between song forms, that are sometimes obscured in harmony and accompanied singing. Of course I like the basic premise of Dangerous Blues, in that it speaks to all of us who write checks we can’t cash, or who sound good as long as we are standing behind or in front of something else.

Dortheen Douglas Always Take Mother’s Advice is a beautiful and romantic lyrical tribute to the place held by women who assume the nurturing role for the human race. What is striking about this song is the way it taps emotions that are reserved for the woman I watched all my life struggling to carve out a space for me in a society that did not care if I made it or not. Mama cared and was opinionated. And Douglas at 16 captured the caring and the reality that some of us don’t listen.

More than anything this collection strikes me as the best singing lesson I have ever had in Black American vocal style. Its forte is the solo line as most of the songs on the record are sung in unison or with intermittent or sparse harmonies. I find that Black American solo and choral singing is usually such a listening experience that it is almost impossible to be analytical about it in the way one would have to be if one were to learn how to sing a Black vocal style. In this singing the basic techniques and characteristics required in executing Black vocal lines are laid bare. There is a wonderful openness and nakedness about the way in which the voices remain in conversation and all the while dance in the realm only found in Black singing.

Several years ago, while engaged in research for a book on the first generation of post-emancipation Southern blacks, I came upon the words to these songs in the WPA folklore collection at the Mississippi State Archives in Jackson. The actual recordings I located in the Archive of Folk Culture of the Library of Congress. The recordings were made in May and June 1939 in the sewing room of the Women’s Camp at the Mississippi State Peniternal Farm in Parchman. I had been aware of the recordings made by Alan Lomax in 1947 at the Men’s Camp but I knew of no comparable recordings of women’s prison songs, white or black. But I did know, from my own work, how Parchman Penitentiary had come to symbolize many of the deeply rooted injustices of race relations in the South. For generations of black men and women, it was a kind of death-in-life.

Well, the judge that sentenced me
Ought to be here himself
Say, I'd rather be dead, Lord
Than to be here in this lowdown place.

In the history and civic courses taught in the schools, North and South, students learned of a Constitution and a judicial system superior to that of any other nation on earth. Such lessons, however, were belied by the day-to-day experiences of black Americans. The starkest example of the contradiction between the Constitution, the laws, and the lives of most blacks lay in the perversion of justice and in the deep complicity of the criminal justice system, the enforcement agencies and the legal profession in that perversion. The law made few if any pretenses toward impartiality; it was all white, and it functioned largely to advance and reinforce the economic and social repression of blacks. The laws discriminated against them, the courts upheld a double standard of justice, and the police acted as the enforcers. In a system of justice which treated black offenders with extraordinary severity while granting virtual immunity to whites charged with crimes against blacks, such concepts as "guilt" and "innocence" lost their meaning.

Got me accused of peeping—I can't even see a thing,
Got me accused of beggin'—I can't even raise my hand.
Bad luck, bad luck is killin' me,
I just can't stand no more of this third degree.

Got me accused of taxes, I don't have a lousy dime,
Got me accused of children an' none of them is mine.

Got me accused of murder, I never harmed a man,
Got me accused of forgery, I can't even write my name.

No wonder the Southern judicial system figured so prominently in black song and folklore: the bigoted judge and jury, the petty prosecutions, the unequal sentences, the impossibility of securing a fair trial, and the prisons themselves. ("This place is nine kinds of hell," an Alabama convict wrote. "I'm suffering death every day here.") The history of black people in the United States is not simply a history of extralegal violence, measured by mob lynchings and terrorist attacks; it is a history of legal violence, a history of violence sanctioned by the law. The "better class" of whites furnished the lawyers and judges and many of the jurors. And in the aftermath of mob violence, their silence if not their acquiescence implicated them in the very crimes they sometimes denounced.

The odds were formidable. Every black person sensed that. The law was to be feared, not respected. "Dere ain' no use," a Richland County, South Carolina, black testified:

De courts er dis land is not for niggers . . . [When it come to trouble, de law an' a nigger is de white man's sport, an' justice is a stranger in them precincts, an' mercy is unknown. An' de Bible say we must pray for yeanny. Drap on you' knee, brothers, an' pray to God for all de crackers an' de judges an' de courts an' de solicitors, sheriff's an' police in de land . . .

Both whites and black leaders expressed dismay over the degree to which the black lawbreaker came to be viewed in the black community not as a criminal but as a martyr and victim, how the community not only sheltered the accused but in some instances honored them—especially if whites alone had suffered from their alleged crimes. Their very audacity and boldness in flouting the white man's law and customs impressed blacks, as did the way they went to their deaths. On the scaffold in the last moments of his life, in 1894, black outlaw John Hardy was asked if he wanted to pray. He replied, "Just give me time to kill another man, Lord, Lord. Just give me time to kill another man."

Mississippi women hoe weeds out of the garden plot.

To read the documents of the U.S. Department of Justice, housed in the National Archives, is to be exposed to a vast record of white injustice, terrorism, and economic coercion: blacks driven off the lands they were working, victimized by a violence that went unpunished, abused on chain gangs, held in peonage to work for the profit of others—more often than not in collusion with the authorities sworn to uphold the law and the Constitution. "In the underground of our history," Ralph Ellison has observed, "much of what is ignored defies our attention by continuing to grow and have consequences. In the South, as in much of the North, the law did not exist for the protection of black men and women; it was for their prosecution and incarceration. And the law and the lawmen were the enemies—not only of black people but of justice itself.

They got the judges
They got the lawyers
They got the jury-rolls
They got the lawyer
They don't come by ones
They got the sheriffs
They got the deputies
They don't come by twos
They got the shotgun
They got the rope
We got the justice
In the end
And they come by tens.

Leo F. Litwack
Author of Been in the Storm So Long
Pulitzer Prize for History

This album, I hope, will correct the idea that the significant source of American blues songs is primarily male. Like American history, American indigenous music has been formed and formulated as much by women, if not more, as by men. Yet to read the literature, it is Blind Lemon Jefferson who really put it together and was the true blues shouter of the 1920s. The songs collected here, for the first time on record, illustrate many of the original folk beginnings in the history of the blues. The variety is huge, from funk to elegance and sometimes both combine in one phrase. We hear the women swing and romp, scat, as well as chant lilting dirges and narrate stories.

The music is "everyday," not originally intended for performance. These are untrained voices, uninhibited, approaching the songs with naturalness. No matter the tempo, they fall along with their own tone. Musically, they are free. Though it was a music of survival, projecting deep sadness, it was also a music of celebration, of joy in life.

Some sections of the songs here reach the level of high art. An art without artifice, guiltless, without any pretension that is completely charming yet tinged with their darker past.

The lives of these Mississippi women in the 1930s were dominated by their own history, a living past so real that among the older women, there
There are other mechanical sounds from the equipment that were equally hard to get rid of without doing damage to the integrity of the music.

Bessie Smith and Ida Cox sang Jailhouse Blues in sympathy for their sisters in prison. Ma Rainey sang Cell Bound Blues and Chain Gang Blues for the same reason. Yes, Virginia, women were manacled too, in the first decade of this century.

I've been through the land, skippin' through the wind. I tell all you girls and boys, Yes, where poor Matte have been. The jailhouse was my beginning, An the penitentiary be my end.

The line: If you doin' like me, it's a cinch I doin' likka you, has the rhythm, meter and cadence of a popular ragtime song of the first decade of the century, Under The Bamboo Tree. It's fascinating to see how interrelated and intertwined the history of America is through the popular culture. T.S. Elliot, who was a native of St. Louis, heard that popular song too, and, like Mattie Thomas, used it in his artistic expression. That same rhythm, meter and cadence appears in the poem Fragment of a from Sweeney Agonistes.

Side B opens with the biggest problem of being confined, No Mo Freedom. Eva White, 24, was standing on the corner of North Parish and Church Street in Jackson, Mississippi and was arrested. If she was or wasn't soliciting, it didn't matter because she knew she had no chance in the system. She was Parchman bound.

Don't tell me the moon looks pretty, shining down through the willow tree. I can see my baby but my baby can't see me.

She learned this song in another prison, Jackson Hinds County Jail. Mattie Mae Thomas was so moved by this plaintive ballad, she stepped forward and told Halpert she wanted to sing that song too. She made up some verses there on the spot that are hard to understand, but she does communicate the depth of her feeling. Where Have You Been John Billy? is sung by three women. Two of them learned it as children, one in Natchez and another in Greenville and the third learned it in Parchman. Gonna Need My Help Some Day is sadly sung by Elonor Boyer.

When the sun rose this morning, I was lying down on my floor. I was screaming and hollerin': Baby, please don't go. I said I saw a right angel, you gonna need my help some day.

She continues her mournful melody, but it is not without hope: I'm a prisoner, my baby, someday I'll be free.

Clarksdale woman waits at a cotton bin.

Susie Gal is a game song played in a ring, clapping hands. It was Edna Taylor's choice to sing. "I'm a peepin' Susie."

Go Way Devil, Leave Me Alone is sung when the women are in the sewing room or in the field. "They keeps time with the hoo...each person keep up with the song."

Make The Devil Leave Me Alone is a "Holiness song" that Mary James learned in her Holiness Church.

Old Apple Tree In The Ground is sung by Elizabeth Moore, who learned it from her mother when she was 7 years old.

Shake Em On Down is a song Lucille Walker, 25 years old, said she learned from a man. When Halpert asked her what kind of song it was, her reply was "blues."

Get down my cab, mama in your gown. This old baby gone to, shake em on down. Oh must I holler, Oh must I shake em on down?

Ricketlest Superintendent is sung only when the "superintendent is nowhere around." Both men and women sang it when they were picking cotton. The question: "What ya gonna do when they send your man to war?" is answered with the traditional line, which describes a desperate condition: I'm gonna drink muddy water and sleep in a hollow log.

Penitentiary Blues concludes the album by our star, if we had one. Mattie Mae Thomas sings her fifth song accompanied by a group. Hear how they linger with the sounds, and why not, they're in no hurry to go anywhere. It is somber indeed, full of hurt and pain because the woman is in jail without knowing her crime. It is similar to the song that opened this side, No Mo Freedom sung by Eva White, who was arrested for standing on a corner.

Rosetta Reitz
"Mary Alice Banneker."
"How old are you?"
"21."
"Next girl?"
"Opal Brown."
"How old are you?"
"26."
"Next girl?"
"Liz Moore."
"How old are you?"
"32."
"Mary James."
"How old are you?"
"28."
"Mary James, what is the name of the song they are going to sing?"
"Rickiest Superintendant."
"Where do they sing that song?"
"Parchman."
"Where do they sing it?"
"In the fields."
"Who sings it?"
"All of them."
"I mean who sings it?"
"The entire crew."
(And there is a discussion as to whether he wants names or not.)
He clarifies that he wants groups, men or women, and Mary James answers, "The men and the women, in the field."
"Do you sing it in the sewing room?"
"Yes sir."
"What kind of song is it?"
"Penitentiary Blues."

Gott the ricketiest superintendent,
Gott the worst sergeant on the farm,
And if I make it to the bushes,
My sergeant can't do me no harm.

The song begins with Mary James leading off, most of the voices are in unison, with one voice doing a trace unsteady line of harmony that is resolved to unison as the song progresses. The lead voice is clear and open, there is a freshness and lack of reserve in the singing. Everyone knows the songs, knows the verses before they are issued out by the songleader. This is not because of a set order of verses, but a sense of the closeness of the women in this unusual session.

We were in battle, we were right, jail was not going to stop us.
I also think of Angela Davis. Millions of us knew when they started to look for her, they would never find her, cried when they did, and went to trial with her, organized for her release and celebrated her freedom.
I also think of Joan Little whose jail experience touched me so deeply and brought me to an affirmation of a place in myself shared by all women.
That we are victimized, exploited, raped, hated, killed because we are women.
What Joan Little did for me was killed the jailer who sexually assaulted her. She showed me rapists could die and unleashed a rage in me that has not stopped. I wrote a song for her and me and my community and organized for her freedom, and celebrated when she was freed from the murder after being wanted dead or alive in New York. I was depressed when she was arrested on the charge that had her in jail in the first place for the jailer to be able to think he could use her in any way he pleased. I was glad when she was freed from that. I hurt when she was hospitalized in New York with a minor gunshot wound. I wonder about her these days hoping she is okay, but I don't know if she is.
What different about my personal women-jail experience is that we were, or became, known, and the struggle to free us was national and worldwide and we were right and knowing made a big difference in how we felt and talked about ourselves.

The women who are given voice through this collection are incarcerated: they may be guilty as charged or they may be falsely imprisoned. They are not known by us while they are doing their time. These songs are a small artificial window they cut with Herbert Halpert and John A. Lomax. At least the Halpert work reveals an anxiousness to please and participate. I do not know what they expected. Maybe they had heard about Leadbelly singing himself to freedom. Maybe they responded with enthusiasm to anyone who felt they had something of value to offer. They sing prison work songs, blues, ring play songs, inside songs about sexual play, and sexual exploitation, songs sung by the male prisoners, songs they learned, picked up or songs they wrote. And the Lomax session has the most wonderful range of congregational church, gospel and spiritual songs with rich full practiced harmonies. Anyway, whatever the motivation, we owe to these women, to Halpert, to Lomax, to Wolfe, and to Rosetta Records for letting us look in through this window they made so long ago. Sorry it took us so long.

Bennie Johnson Reagon notes continue inside

The women riffed on their sewing as they did on their music.
Notice the woman on the second step. She has a ruffle on her skirt while the woman (she barely looks 15) on the first step has a skirt cut on the bias, turning the stripes into inverted Vs.

These women are my Black sisters locked up in jail in Parchman Penitentiary. How close can I get to who you are? How are you feeling? I was jailed in Albany, Georgia, during the Civil Rights Movement, but I was jailed with over 200 people, shared a cell built for 4 with 11 women. We were in this condition for a few days and then moved to the Lee County Stockade where I shared a room with over 60 women. There was bad food, overflowing toilets, but not Parchman. There was the most powerful and prolonged singing I had ever done in my life. The singing I did in jail was a celebration of a stance.

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THE WOMEN'S HERITAGE SERIES

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY PRESENTS

JAILHOUSE BLUES


TAKEN FROM MUSICAL GATHERINGS IN 1936 AND 1939 BY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS FIELDWORKERS HERBERT HALPERT AND JOHN A. LOMAX, RESPECTIVELY, THESE RECORDINGS ENABLE US TO FEEL SOMETHING OF WHAT IT MEANT TO BE A BLACK WOMAN IN THE SOUTH, BEFORE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. HER MUSIC SIMULTANEOUSLY REFLECTED SOCIAL INJUSTICES AND REFLECTED HER FORTITUDE.

FOREMOST AMONG MISSISSIPPI'S CULTURAL LEGACIES, TO ITSELF AND TO THE WORLD, IS ITS MUSIC. THE MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES & HISTORY IDENTIFIES AND PRESENTS THE TRADITIONAL ARTS OF OUR STATE. THIS ALBUM IS THE THIRD IN OUR SERIES CELEBRATING MISSISSIPPI'S RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE. I ENCOURAGE YOU TO DRINK DEEPLY FROM THE WELLSPRING OF MUSIC THAT IS MISSISSIPPI.

Cheri L. Wolfe
Folk Arts Program Director
Mississippi Department of Archives & History

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The songs on this album were collected primarily by Herbert Halpert in 1939 except for the ones sung by Josephine Parker and Elionor Boyer, which were collected by John A. Lomax in 1936.

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