I have to paint my face

Sam Chatman

Butch Cage and Willie Thomas

Mildred Lewis, Kathryn Pitman, and Jasper Love

Wade Walton and R.C. Smith
I HAVE TO PAINT MY FACE

In an age preoccupied with New Sounds, these are some old sounds.

The 19th century Negro minstrel could sing "I have to paint my face" with a twinkle and a wry smile, perhaps never suspecting the extent to which his children and grandchildren would be buying hair straighteners and skin bleaches. The face-painting process of the modern Negro is part of the hard struggle toward substance and suburbia, a kind of progress that involves the conscious elimination of racial characteristics and the silencing of a rich heritage. He dabs himself with the pale colors of middleclassness; in the slum-centers like Dallas and Memphis and Chicago there are growing neighborhoods of dark faces in white collars, and paradoxically, as the Negro moves into first class citizenship, from another quarter there is a burgeoning, an almost desperate wanting to hear and preserve the music that was produced during and largely because of the Negro's past servility.

This document is a random collection of the vestigial song and rhythm found in the Mississippi River Delta in the summer of 1960. There is no such thing as a comprehensive collection of the music that might once have been found there before the demise of the cotton culture and the shift from rural to urban centers. In lieu of that, these are vivid slices of sound which stand as representation of the common spirit that prevailed through the blues, the minstrel pieces, the spirituals, and the improvisations of a people united by race and circumstance.

It is music that forces sharply focused scenes to mind:

- an ambulance racing away from a rent house
- a man groping under the bed for mud-crusted shoes
- a congregation praying for a seat in Gloryland
- hands peeling open a newly butchered hog
- the glint of a straight razor
- a black woman frying fat meat
- fingers musing over a guitar while a rooster crows for day

And in large part, it is the kind of music that "just happens" but seldom happens to find its way onto record. The Negro's music is often as casually spontaneous as the talk of two workmen passing the time of day around a courthouse square. But this spontaneity is a delicate quality, easily squelched by formal recording techniques. In this instance the equipment went into people's homes where they felt at ease and, gradually forgetting the intrusive microphone, began to perform for one another and for the delight of visiting strangers. At times the words are blurred, the sound is off-mike but one hears in these selections that essential easy-going creativity that is the heart of the tradition; of the house party and country supper and of casual encounters between musicians who can abandon themselves to a boisterous dialogue built around a simple figure hammered out of a piano or to rhythmically kidding around with a guitar, a razor strap and the idea of a "day shave."

Although the culture that so vitally and uniquely expresses itself here, is slowly passing away, it is by no means gone. One need not take up the crimes of slavery or reconstruction to understand the rural life this music reflects. The near-equivalent still exists in a form that is almost impossible for most Americans to grasp. One of the artists, Robert Curtis Smith, was born only 30 years before he made these recordings. That is to say his life has been contained by the era of the New Deal, social legislation, and the Supreme Court's civil rights decisions. Yet this simple, talented, hard-working man can tell — guffawing at your disbelief -- of circumstances he regards as quite natural that reveal a status quo of criminal contempt for his Constitutional privileges. In both a personal and an impersonal way his right to live is doubted. He has been denied the minimum wage, he has been jailed without due process, he has been held in penal bondage. Given a strong body and only a moderate ability to rise above his condition, he is obligated to squelch hunger, disease. Born and raised in Mississippi, one of a family of 13, his horizons are market towns like Cruger, Tchula, Sunflower, and Grenada. His one abortive effort to move north brought him into contact with the feast-or-famine employment tides of an industrial city he did not understand and could not cope with. He returned to the Delta and world cut to a pattern of "chopping and making crops" on a "sunup to sundown" for "maybe four, maybe five dollars a day."

During the winter when farm work is at a standstill Smith's struggle is elemental: begging for used clothing, hunting for scraps of wood to heat the one room shack in which he and his wife and their nine children live, in a nation whose "big" problems are bomb shelters and automation, Smith feeds his family during the winter by hunting in the fields: "Maybe there'll be some little job but mostly there ain't nothing to do but hunt -- there's still some rabbits out in the brush and that feeds us some."

The circumstances of his life are not unusual but Smith is an exception in that he is one of the youngest known singers who remains well within the country blues tradition. By contrast, one of the oldest known country musicians is Buteh Cage who was born in 1894 in Franklin County, Mississippi and lives now a few miles away on the fringe of the Delta country in Zachary, Louisiana. A representative of the great procession of Negro fiddlers who provided music for both white and colored dances, he is a rare find. Most of what is known of these fiddlers comes from his recollection, hearsay, and the variety of rustic sketches that picture rural dances with a laughing dark face invariably peering over a fiddle. Buteh Cage is a direct descendant of a musical line that stretches back to the colonial America that St. John de Crevecoeur described in his letters:

Poor as we are, if we have not the gorgeous balls, the harmonious concerts, the shrill horn of Europe, yet we dilute our hearts as well with the simple negro fiddle, and with our rum and water, as you do with your delicious wines.

Cage's partner, Willie B. Thomas, was born in 1912, growing up to the same pattern of work as cane cutter, freight loader, cotton chopper, and weekend musician. But he stands apart in that he is a church minister who finds nothing sinful in singing the blues.

One of Sam Chatman's songs, You Shall Be Free, was born as an orthodox church song "Oh, Mourners" that related instructions for finding the path to heaven, and has evolved through the minstrel stage as a comic piece which became the basis for Talking Blues still popular in the white hillbilly tradition. Chatman's own career has been equally varied. Born in 1899 on a plantation near Bolton, Mississippi, he is the 7th son of a slavey time fiddler who ruled an intensely musical family. Taking the name the Mississippi Sheiks, Sam and his brothers -- Bo, Lonnie, Harry, Edgar, and Lanny -- played for socials, picnics, and festivals through the Delta. During the heyday of selling minstrel shows and theatricals they toured the country to an extent reflected by recordings made -- by individuals or groups of the family -- in such diverse points as Atlanta, New York, Chicago, Jackson, New Orleans, and San Antonio. The repertoire ranged from blues to gospel song to minstrel pieces to whatever might be demanded by their various

1 Crevecoeur, Sketches of Eighteenth Century America.
white and colored, rural and urban audiences. With Bo (who is credited with composing Corrina, Corrina) ailing and feebly in Memphis, and the other brothers dead or scattered, Sam Chatman lives in a shotgun house across the tracks in Hollendale, Mississippi, working variously as yard man, day laborer, and truck driver. Adding the scarce but vital element of the near-forgotten minstrel songs to this collection, these are Chatman's only recordings in the past 25 years.

At the time of recording Jasper Love was working at the cottonseed mill in Clarksdale, Mississippi but during the following winter a letter asking for a loan said the mill had shut down. Love has played piano around Memphis and with a relative, Willie Love, who recorded at one time for the regional Trumpet label. He is around 46 years old, originally from Helena, Arkansas, but now a frequent visitor to towns like Sunflower and Tupelo, Mississippi. The dialogue selection he does with friend Columbus Jones in soundstaging like another dialogue-at-the-piano recorded by two Texas bluesmen a few months earlier. Since neither could have heard the other recording, comparison of the two pieces dissimilar in detail but alike in mood and concept reveals the extent to which people of the rural south share a common ground of inspiration (in this case a then-popular dance step) and inclination for impulsively reminiscing over an instrument.

Kathryn Pitman, like thousands of her contemporaries across the land, has found the church to be socially the most acceptable forum for her emotional expressions. Still in high school at the time of these recordings, she and the other members of the Centennial Baptist Church's Youth Choir, take music in school but she says it is "on a more cultured basis". The girls apparently knew the deacon at whose house pianist Jasper Love was making a recording and hearing the music they came over and were happy to have the strangers put a few of their numbers on their tape machine.

Since he made these recordings Wade Walton has set out to try his luck as an entertainer in New York City. But at the time was a barber at the Big 6 Shop on 14th Street in Clarksdale, Mississippi. He is known as a clown, a great outgoing personality who gets on the local leaders for stunts like putting his shoes on backward for a laugh. He plays harmonica, guitar, and sings; tells riotous stories and breaks into impromptu dances in between haircuts. He offers jokes and hospitality to strangers, as he did one Sunday morning when two field hands wandered into his shop. He asked the newcomers if they played any instrument and one of the strangers, Robert Curtis Smith, answered "I'll give you a little guitar."

Barbershop Rhythm resulted shortly after Walton's energetic hands set a straight razor dancing against a leather strap, calling out "Come on! Get in here with me..."

That is the spirit and the invitation which underlies all that's heard in this portrait of a people's music in its last falling decade.

-Mack McCormick-

I HAVE TO PAINT MY FACE

Arkville F 1005

Side I: 1) I HAVE TO PAINT MY FACE - Sam Chatman vocal and guitar recorded in Hollendale, Miss. on July 25, 1960.
2) YOU SHALL BE FREE - Sam Chatman - same as (1)
3) I STAND AND WONDER - Sam Chatman - same as (1)
4) FORTY-FOUR BLUES - Butch Cage vocal and violin; Willie Thomas vocal and guitar; Mrs. Thomas drums. Recorded in Zachary, La. summer 1960.
6) LAY MY BURDEN DOWN - Sam Chatman - same as (1) above
7) SAVE A SEAT FOR ME - Kathryn Pitman lead voice; Mildred Lewis piano; and supporting voices - all members of the Centennial Baptist Church Youth Choir. Recorded in Clarksdale, Miss. on July 23, 1960.

Side II: 1) BARBERSHOP RHYTHM - Wade Walton slapping straight razor; R. C. Smith guitar with intermittent talking. Recorded in Clarksdale, Miss. July 24, 1960 at the Big 6 Barbershop.
2) GOING BACK TO TEXAS - R. C. Smith vocal and guitar - same date as last.
3) THE SLOP - Jasper Love piano and vocal with comments by Columbus Jones. Recorded in Clarksdale, Miss. on July 23, 1960.
4) LOST LOVE BLUES - R. C. Smith vocal and guitar - same date as (3).
5) LONELY WIDOW - R. C. Smith - same as last
6) ROOSTER BLUES - guitar solo by Wade Walton (with unknown rooster crowing) Recorded in Clarksdale, Miss. on July 17, 1960.
7) BUTCH'S BLUES - Butch Cage vocal and fiddle; guitar and vocal by Willie Thomas. Recorded in Zachary, La. summer 1960.

All recordings made by Chris A. Strachwitz with assistance from Mr. and Mrs. Paul Oliver.

2 Lightnin Hopkins and Jackson, A Treasury of Field Recordings, Vol II