Blues from Texas

The Small British independent label, "77" Records, has just issued Volume II of the patently valuable "A Treasury of Field Recordings" series, a three-disc panoramic survey of the vital, undiluted folk music traditions of the Houston and East Texas area. (The initial volume of the set was discussed at some length in these pages as "The Sound of Houston," SR, Jan. 14.) The series, on the basis of the two albums currently available, bids fair to become one of the more significant and useful folk song documentary projects of the past several years.

This second disc, containing fifteen selections and most aptly subtitled "Regional and Personalized Song," was again put together by Houston's tireless, dedicated young folklorist-playwright Mack McCormick. The album is a much more immediately appealing collection than its predecessor, for here the emphasis is on the individual performer. Lengthier performances and a greater amount of original rather than relatively fixed traditional materials have resulted in a well-balanced program of warmer, more "human" selections that should appeal to a wider audience than the first album.

The greater portion of the collection—as in the initial disc—is given over to the handy, fructifying Afro-American musical heritage, with nine of the fifteen items being wholly within these traditions, and two others, though performed by white singers, of decided Negro origin.

The most archaic of these traditions, the participative work song, is represented by a single selection, "Hammer Ring," a surgically powerful example of the antiphonal group song (of proven West African descent), performed by a group of convict laborers led by R. C. Williams. This recording, which dates from the very outset of the Houston documentary project, was made in March, 1951, at Ramsey State Farm in Otey, Texas, one of seven such prisoner-worked bottom-land plantations sprawling along the meandering course of the Brazos River where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Certainly one can hear in this stirring performance the living truth of folklorist Alan Lomax's remark that "... the wildest and most beautiful of these American Negro work songs come from the penitentiary where the old Southern system of forced labor reaches its apogee," for in the impassioned and metrically regular singing of song-leader Williams and his group of axe-wielding prisoners the stark, brutal reality of a life of forced toil under a merciless sun is vividly evoked.

Similarly, "Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos," feelingly executed by John A. Lomax, Jr., is another selection that falls within this archaic tradition. Its verses provide an eloquent, if informal, history of the inhuman treatment of the convict laborers leased by the state to the large plantation owners at the turn of the century:

Oughta been on this river in nineteen-four, Oh-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o.
You'd find a dead man on every turnrow, Mmm-mmm-mm
You oughta been on this river in nineteen-ten,
They was driving the women like they drove the men...

Two additional performances in this stunning collection afford a glimpse into the shockingly oppressive conditions of Negro tenant farm life. "Tom Moore's Farm," here included in two versions, details the plight of the convict laborer paroled to the plantation of Mr. Moore, a wealthy near-feudal landholder of Navasota, Texas. (It might be mentioned that this dreadful parole system exists to this day in several Southern states. The superb Louisiana blues singer Robert Pete Williams is, for example, now serving a seven-year parole to a farm owner in Denham Springs, Louisiana. In exchange for approximately eighty to ninety hours of backbreaking labor a week, Williams receives the princely sum of $75 per month plus room and board. He rightly says, "I ain't free yet.")

The origin of "Tom Moore's Farm" has been fairly conclusively traced, the notes inform us, to a singer, Yank Thornton, who worked for a time in the early 1930s as a field hand on the Moore plantation and thus experienced at first hand the harrowing brutality and victimization so tellingly described in its verses. The song was rapidly assimilated into the local folksong traditions, quickly becoming one of the most frequently requested pieces at the back-country suppers and rough dances throughout the Texas cotton belt a quarter of a century ago. McCormick quite justifiably characterizes the song as "... one of the most fully developed narrative or balladlike pieces yet encountered in the blues idiom, and probably the most important traditional song which escaped the grasp of the Lomaxes and other early collectors in Texas."

Yeah, you know, ain't but one thing, you know, this black man done was wrong. (2)
Yeah, you know, that's when I moved my wife and family down onto Tom Moore's farm.

Yeah, you know, Mister Moore's a man don't never stand and grin, He just says, "Keep out the graveyard, I'll save you from the pen."

... I got a telegram this morning, Boy, this is the way it read, (It say "Your wife is dead") Showed it to Mister Moore; say, "Go ahead nigger, do you know you got to plow ol' Red?"

That white man say, "It's been rain­ing, yes, and I'm way behind, I may let you bury that woman, Sam, one of your dinner-times."

The first of the two versions here is impassionedly sung by a sixty-five-year-old sharecropper and singer who prefers to remain anonymous, since he is a close neighbor of the vindictive Mr. Moore in Navasota. The legendary Houston blues bard, Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins, performs the second version in his characteristic vinegary style. (The only previous recording of this important protest song would appear to be Lightnin's 1947 version on the defunct Gold Star label, recorded as "Tim Moore's Farm" for fear of reprisal. This
is available, along with other examples of Hopkins's earliest recorded work, in a fine reissue collection, "Lightnin' Strikes Again," Dart D-8000.)

Some of the most attractive and fiercely individual performances in the album have been provided, as might be expected, by the bluesmen. In "Goin' to the River," for example, relatively young singer-harmonica player Gozy Kilpatrick offers a rough, ingenuous performance only a short remove from the raw, dolorous field cries and hollers that gave birth to the blues form almost a century ago. He is heard again in support of grizzled blues veteran R. C. Forest on the latter's "'Tin Can Alley" and the harsh polytonal music generated by Forest's ragged singing, his crude, stinging guitar accompaniment and Kilpatrick's whining, insinuating harmonica is an almost classic example of the acid, bitterly introspective Texas blues style.

One of the most arresting performances in the collection is "Anything from a Foot-Race to a Resting Place," a blues of striking metaphorical originality by Jealous James Stanchell, a singer-guitarist who performs for tips and handouts in the bars and tonks of Houston's Negro wards. Guitarist Lightnin' Hopkins and boogie-woogie pianist Jack Jackson exchange a bit of good-natured badinage in their informal instrumental, "The Slop," a local dance piece popular in the same city. "This Old World Is in a Terrible Condition" is a lengthy monologue on the deplorable state of contemporary society, delivered in mock-sermon form to the accompaniment of appropriately jaun-

The final selection wholly within the sturdy Afro-American traditions is a topical Gospel song capsulizing the events of World War II, "Oh, What a Time," recorded by the Percy Wilborn Quartet at Retrieve State Farm in Snipe, Texas, early in 1951. It is a joyous, infectiously rhythmic number in the call-and-response format used by most Gospel groups.

A song closely related to the Negro idiom is "Deep Ellum Blues," here executed by a white performer, Paul Elliott, whose singing and guitar-playing styles are heavily indebted to the typical Negro approaches of the region. The song itself is an old Texas piece and has been extensively recorded by performers of both races.

The remaining four selections illustrate several facets of the various white folk song traditions that may be heard in the area to this day. Perhaps the most archaic and revered of these is the Anglo-American ballad tradition, here represented by a performance of "The Waco Girl" by John Q. Anderson, a professor of English at Texas A&M College and an avid student of Texas folklore and song. The song is a lineal descendant of a British broadside ballad dating from 1700, "The Berkshire Tragedy, or The Wittam Miller," and is one of a host of murder ballads that have survived in this country through adaptation, recommending purely local events similar to those narrated in the originals. This variant has a long history in Texas and was learned by the singer's sister as early as 1910 from the singing of her aunt.

Harry Stephens's evocative "Night-Herding Song" is an admirable example of the cowboy song, an indigenous American manifestation of the Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit. This song was one of those included in folklorist John A. Lomax's pioneering 1910 book-length work, "Cowboy Songs," and was, as Stephens remarks in his spoken introduction to his virile, authoritative performance, the only one in the compilation credited to an author.

In "Atomic Energy," forty-year-old balladeer Jimmy Womack offers his own whimsical comments on the loss of personal dignity and incentive increasing mechanization has brought about. His approach, in both conception and execution, is that contemporary offshoot of traditional mountain styles known as "country and Western" music. It is a viable form—in his hands.

The album's final selection, zitherist William Spross's "The Boogie Woogie Machine," is illustrative of the music of the German-American community of the Houston area, one of several such settlements within the environs of the city that have preserved intact the ethnic identities of the groups that settled them (e.g., Polish, Acadian, East Texan, and Negro are but a few of the separate communities that comprise the racial amalgam that is Houston). Generally, the characteristic music of each of these peoples has retained its own distinctive flavor, having resisted complete acculturation more or less successfully—though just how long they will be able to withstand the standardizing influences of the mass communications media is a matter for serious thought. It is more than apparent, however, that their days are numbered.

The great value of McCormick's work in assembling these impressive documentary sets (and in bringing together the over 400 items from which these selections have been culled) is that it preserves and makes readily available to serious students of American folk song a significant slice of several of the fast-disappearing and disparate musical traditions that have come together in the creation of America's distinctive folk music expression.

American record collectors will be pleased to know that Candid Records has arranged for the release of the "Treasury" series here. The first volume, "Traditional Music and Song," should be available within several months, with the second disc following shortly afterwards. In the meantime, however, both volumes may be easily ordered from Great Britain. An international money order (obtainable at any post office) or a personal check in the amount of $6 sent to Dobell's Jazz Record Shop, 77 Charing Cross Road, London W. C. 2, England, will secure either disc for you. This price includes packaging, mailing, and the informative sixty-page accompanying booklet providing complete background materials on all of the selections.

—Peter J. Welding.

A Choice of Instinct

By M. B. Thornton

I PUT bread on a feeder
out of the cat's reach (one must choose between the singer and the killer)

but the birds refused. They choose crumbs sprinkled on the ground and death by cats.

Which is the singer?
Bunny Berigan and his orchestra: "Bunny." "Azure," "There'll Be Some Changes Made," "Sophisticated Swing," "Little Gates Special," "Jazz Me Blues," "High Society," etc. Columbia CL 1612, $3.98, stereo CS 8412, $4.98. One of the big swing bands of the Thirties which never quite succeeded was the one led by trumpeter Bunny Berigan. Irresponsible management is a partial explanation; others are suggested by this collection of reissues from 1937-9. The rhythm sections tended to be dull; the arrangements were careless stocks, and the few soloists of talent (including Joe Bushkin and Georgie Auld) were, except for Berigan, given too little space. Berigan left some beautiful solos on records by a variety of small groups during the Thirties, but with his own big band his solos sound like superficial re-creations of Louis Armstrong.

Aretha Franklin: "Aretha." "Won't Be Long," "Love Is the Only Thing," "All the Things You Are," "3-4, the Blues," "Move," "Always," "Riot-chous," "Relaxing." Columbia CL 1572, $3.98, stereo CS 8522, $4.98. Aretha Franklin is a teen-age singer who considers herself (and is packaged by Columbia) as a pop, rather than a jazz, singer. Her roots, however, are deep in Negro gospel music, and, like Ray Charles, she brings the sweeping passion and vocal nuance of that art to her material. The material itself is a discouraging compendium of rock-and-roll clichés; it is a measure of her genuine talent that Miss Franklin brings any of it to life at all. A small group led by Ray Bryant accompanies her without distinction.


Lionel Hampton: "Swing Classics." "Ring Dem Bells," "Confessions," "Central Avenue Breakdown," "On the Sunny Side of the Street," "Haven't Named It Yet," "What A Babe," etc. RCA Victor LPM 2154, $3.98. These twelve performances, for years buried in Victor's vaults, are among the finest small-group achievements of the late Thirties, and their present reissue is a notable event. Hampton's crisp vibraharp work was at its best during this period, but he is almost overshadowed by a galaxy of sidemen (in nine different groups) which includes some of the most celebrated soloists and rhythm men of the day—among them Gootie Williams, Johnny Hodges, Jess Stacy, Cozy Cole, Clyde Hart, Sonny Greer, Chu Berry, Milt Hinton, Benny Carter, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Christian, Red Allen, Nat Cole, and Sidney Catlett.

Colleen Hawkins: "Night Hawk." "Night Hawk," "There Is No Greater Love," "In a Mellow Tone," "Don't Take Your Love from Me," "Pedalling." Prestige/Swingville 2016, $4.98. Even the greatest improvisers can't maintain a permanently inspired pace, and although Hawkins usually comes as close as any to doing so, his work on this album is uneven. Nonetheless, even uneven Hawkins contains many joys, such as here, the huge wooden tone he uses on the theme of his own tune "Night Hawk" and the effortless unfolding of his first chorus of "There Is No Greater Love." Also on tenor is Eddie Davis, who, despite his tendency to squeal, contributes some lines of lyrical power. The competent rhythm section includes Tommy Flanagan, Ron Carter, and Gus Johnson.

Al Hirt: "He's the King." "I Love Paris," "One O'Clock Jump," "Jazz Me Blues," "The Old Folks at Home," "Laura," etc. RCA Victor LPM 2254, $3.98, stereo LSP 2154, $4.98. Extensive publicity, liner-note claims, and TV appearances notwithstanding, Hirt is not the new "king" of the jazz trumpet. He is a fine big-band section leader with all the virtues such a role demands (lip, big lungs, stamina, volume, and technique) who has turned to commercial Dixieland relieving occasional ventures into swing styles. He is not a creative soloist in any sense, but a virtuoso whose impact depends entirely on musical high-wire walking. If he were not quite so exacting, I might be tempted to call him the Liberace of jazz. On most of these tracks he is accompanied by his noncommercial two-beat Dixieland outfit which, except for a versatile drummer, Paul Ferrara, is beneath comment. One track, "One O'Clock Jump," is a tour de force that comes off. It is a two-and-a-half-minute solo by a good unidentified tenor player; behind him, Hirt, assisted only by his trombonist and a little judicious use of echo, plays the standard "One O'Clock Jump" riffs (both brass and reed), and manages to sound for a moment like the world's best brass section in full cry.

Budd Johnson Quintet: "Let's Swing." "I Only Have Eyes for You," "Uptown Manhattan," "Blues by Budd," "Someone to Watch Over Me," etc. Prestige/Swingville 2015, $4.98. Budd Johnson is a veteran tenor saxophonist whose talent far exceeds his fame. He is one of several Southwestern (and Kansas City) players who had much to do with the establishing and perfecting of early modern jazz styles during the Forties. This LP is one of two good ones under his own name, but his scattered recorded performances elsewhere indicate that it doesn't quite do him justice. His trombonist brother Keg, present here, plays in a straightforward swing style with modern touches. Tommy Flanagan, George Duvivier, and Charlie Persip, all among the most dependable men on their instruments in jazz, provide superb support.

J. J. Johnson Sextet: "J. J. Inc." "Mohawk," "Minor Mist," "In Walked Horace," "Fatback," "Aquarius," "Shutter-bug." Columbia CL 1606, $3.98, stereo CS 8406, $4.98. Johnson is still regarded by many musicians and critics as the finest trombonist in modern jazz; I should make clear that, in my view, his most recent work strikes me as increasingly bland and mechanical. This is a program of six Johnson tunes played by his current sextet and varying from routine funk to the unusual "Aquarius," a somber piece in 12/8 time. Johnson has most of the solo space; Clifford Jordan, a young hard-bop tenor out of John Coltrane, and Freddie Hubbard, a promising young trumpeter, are heard from too.

Carmell Jones: "I'm Gonna Go Fishing," "Come Rain or Come Shine," "Sad March," "Stella's," "Full Moon and Empty Arms," etc. Pacific Jazz PJ 29, $4.98. Like many other young trumpeters, Jones, twenty-four, is a Clifford Brown man. This is his first LP, and it reveals exceptional talent not quite yet under control. His time is excellent, his tone simultaneously clear and heated (he will remind some of Blue Mitchell), his lines alternately gracefull and halting. He does best on a driving, elastic blues in ½ called "I'm Gonna Go Fishing." Also on hand are tenor Harold Land, the accomplished West Coast veteran; pianist Frank Strazzeri, a follower of Tommy Flanagan; a remarkably propulsive and original young bassist named Gary Peacock; and drummer Leon Pettis.

Clarence Russell, with Colleen Hawkins, Emmett Berry, Bob Brookmeyer, Nat Pierce, Milt Hinton, and J. J. Johnson, offers arrangements by Pierce frame a number of fine solos. The set includes one masterpiece, "Mariooch," a slow blues with Russell and rhythm only. Russell is a unique, timeless, and unclassifiable soloist. —MATT EDEY.