BLUES IN THE MISSISSIPPI NIGHT

Authentic Field Recordings from the Alan Lomax Collection of Negro Folk Music

Nixa Jazz Today Series 33 1/3 rpm LP
BLUES IN THE MISSISSIPPI NIGHT

Recorded and Edited by Alan Lomax  Production by Denis Preston

This recording was made almost fifteen years ago, long before the days of tape machines, on a little portable disc recorder. It tells the story of an unhappy way of life that was gradually passing away. It describes the social conditions, and the emotional state of Negroes who were the proud descendants of a people that existed in the South between 1890 and 1930 when the blues were formed. This was a period of dramatic changes in the life of the South. Cotton was no longer king. Negro labourers, not needed on the plantation, were set adrift, to find work where they could—on the railroad, on the levee, on construction jobs of all sorts. Stable family life was nearly impossible for these men, who wandered from job to job, from woman to woman. These Negroes felt kin to the little boll weevil; they felt they weren't wanted anywhere. They sang...

I'm a poor boy, a long way from home,
I ain't got nobody to feel my care,
The frozen' ground was my foldin' bed last night.
If you ever been down, how you feel.

Feel like I'm drunk, ain't got no drivin' wheel.

They had the blues, the low-down blues, the dirty mistreated blues, the broke and hungry blues, the hopeless blues, the evil-hearted blues. Having severed their ties with their home counties, where it they understood local patterns of prejudice, where they were known to be the children of good old souls and to be treated with respect, they became, as this record so graphically puts it, just "black faces," liable to be treated anywhere by suspicious or irritable white policemen. They had the Memphis Blues, the Fort Worth and the Dallas Blues, the East St. Louis Blues, the Chicago Blues, the Southern Blues, and the Gaol's North Blues.

They sung on the road-building gangs and railroad repair gangs; they suffered their anger and sorrow and frustration at their mules, as they scooped up the dirt for roadbeds and levees; on the chaingangs they sang the old songs of slavery and made new rhymes about mean captives and long, painful prison years. All this was "the blues" or, more accurately, the rough material out of which the blues proper were contrived.

Like all the people of their race, they had a passion for the dance. Their fathers, and grandparents had danced to a music which reflected the wild, fun-loving, confident spirit of the frontier, which Negroes and whites together helped to tame. But in the beginning of the 20th century the frontier period was over; the Negro had to compete for work with the poor whites; and the gay reels and hokey-jump tunes of the pioneers lost their appeal.

So in the Yazoo Delta country, south of Memphis, where the conditions described on this record were typical, there emerged this new dance music, the work of many hands and voices. The guitar, mandolin, mouth harp and piano players learned to make their instruments sing the tunes. At the same time they composed bass patterns which at their best sound like two or three drums playing complex counter-rhythms. The singers, meanwhile, wove fragments of the work-songs and ballads into the simple stanza-form; at first, one line, repeated four times; then three lines with a rhyming or punch line; then two lines with a rhyming line. Hundreds of stanzas were composed by anonymous singers, who roamed the South and Middle-west. But it must be remembered that all these were blues were for dancing. A Negro was more apt to dance the blues for his own amusement; but, when he sang for the public, he was forming the orchestra, with his voice and his guitar, for a roomful of workers, clenching their women tight and dancing.

It was our great good fortune that soon after the blues became a fully developed form they were put on commercial records. The early records had fabulous sales for that time, and the blues singers and companies made a means for making money and for perpetuating their art, rushed to make thousands of records. A whole school of semi-professional musicians arose; and their records document the great migration of the twenties and thirties, when Negroes moved North in search of better opportunities. The morality and the social forms of the rural South were then ruthlessly swept aside; and these songs record the sorrow and violence of this period in a fashion that is often brutally realistic.

Three of these semi-professional singers set down their experiences on this record. All three had been born near Memphis. All three had grown up under the Jim Crow system. They knew the levee camps, the railroad gang, the plantation, and the southern prison farm from personal experience. They had played at a thousand Saturday night dances from New Orleans to Chicago, had seen love and life in the raw; they had watched men killed and they knew how brutal the police could be, when they handled a friendless stranger. All three had played in Northern cities and, like so many of their profession, had come back South to see their folks and live through one of the temporary slumps in the music business.

I met them at a country dance, where I was recording rural folk-songs. They played for me for one evening and we made friends. They liked me because I knew and understood their songs. Early one Sunday morning, after a dance, when I judged the proper moment had come, I put the microphone in a far corner of the room near the piano, where Leroy, the tall and handsome piano player was singing the blues. Natchez, the guitar player, and Sib, the harmonica-player were sitting nearby. Natchez was a man of about fifty; tall, powerful, dignified and extremely intelligent. Leroy, about thirty, had absorbed more city ways. Sib was the youngest of the three and the most primitive. If you asked him for a blues on a new subject, he immediately began pouring it out, singing through and over his harmonica. Like many poets, he was so emotional as to become confused at times; the other two laughed at him and teased him, like big brothers.

After Leroy had finished his blues, I put a question to them. I asked them to explain to me, a white man, what the blues were, where they had come from, why people sang them. This was the only question I was allowed to ask in the two hours that intervened. My friends were ready to talk, but soon they forgot all about me and my recording machine and talked to each other, pouring out experiences and feelings, that were the accumulation of a lifetime. Natchez's conversation, like an emerid black Socrates, skillfully drawing the two other men out, and guiding the conversation deeper and deeper into the heart of the matter.

I have changed nothing in what they said, except to cut here and there, and, occasionally, to add excerpts from other songs to illustrate their musical points. Their logic, it seems to me, is inescapable. The Blues are songs which stand for the whole system of prejudice, exploitation, terror and rejection, which shaped the lives of Southern Negroes in the period between 1890 and 1940.

The recording also shows that people who are virtually illiterate and uneducated can view a complex social problem as a whole, that they can analyse it and think about it logically, that they can present their views, coherently and powerfully, and with great "literary" skill.

This, then is the story of the blues told by men who have lived the blues and created the blues. At their request I have concealed their identities, and I hope all who listen will respect their wish to remain anonymous. Surely, in this case, it is what is said and sung, not who says it, that is the heart of the matter, for these men speak for a region and a people, not for themselves.

Alan Lomax

Notice:
All the matter in this record is copyright; a part of a work in progress called My Heart Stuck Sorrow, to be published by Cassell and by Duell Sloan and Pearce in 1958, and may not be used without permission of the author.

Distributed by Pye Group Records (Sales) Ltd 66 Haymarket London SW1
Blues in the Mississippi Night—side one

Leroy: (Sings)
You've got to cry a little, die a little,
Well, and sometimes you got to lie a little,
Chorus: Life is like that...
Well, that's what you've got to do,
Well, and if you don't understand,
People, I'm sorry for you.
Sometimes you'll be held up, sometimes held down,
Well, and sometimes your best friends don't even want you around, you know...
Chorus: Life is like that...
There's some things you got to keep, some things you gotta repeat.
People, happiness, well, is never complete, you know...
Chorus: Life is like that...
Sometimes you'll be helpless, sometimes you'll be restless,
Well, keep on struggling, so long as you're not breathless, because...
Chorus: Life is like that...

Natchez: Some people say that the blues is a cow wants to see her calf, but I don't say it like that. I say it's a man that's got a companion, and she turns him down, and things like that happen, you know—and that's where I get the blues from—when I want to see my baby and want to see her bad, and something happens, I can't find her—and that gives me the blues. So what do you think about it? You got something to say about it? The reason they have the blues.

Sib: Well, I tell you, it really worries me just to think I used to have a sweet little girl—you know, name Estelle. You know, an' we used to go to school together, an' we natchly grew up together, you know, grew up together... in other words, wanted to look alike and everything. And I hear the blues in them—and everything is an' an' an' an' an' you know what I mean, she's always on her mother for her... and where she turned me down—and that cause me to sing the blues—see, it couldn't get her, see, I thought, that's the reason that I thought of Little Schoolgirl, see, 'cause me an' this girl used to go to school together, you know, and then...—well, her parents thought I wasn't the right boy for her—yes, you understand, an' wouldn't make her happy and everything. So, then they turned me down, and then I just got to sitting down thinking, you understand, and then I thought of a song, and I started to drink'in and then I started to singin' that's the way...

Chorus: What was you drinkin'?
Sib: Ah well, you know at that time out in the hills, like that, you couldn't get this good whiskey, you had to drink what you could. I was drinkin', you know, some of that white-corn whiskey, you know, made out of the real corn, you know...

Chorus: What about the places where you didn't have to pay rent?... Just on a plantation.
Leroy: Well, I still had troubles.
Natchez: Yeah, I know that.

Leroy: (Laughing) I mean women troubles and so forth and so on like that. Blues is the only thing that helps me... I mean, that's the only way to kind of ease my situation. If I have lots of troubles, for instance, rent situation, and so forth and so on like that, the blues is the only thing that helps me...

Chorus: Well, what about the places where you don't have to pay rent?... Just on a plantation.
Leroy: Well, I still had troubles.

Natchez: Yeah, I know that.

Leroy: (Laughing) I mean women troubles and so forth and so on like that. Blues is the only thing that helps me... I mean, that's the only way to kind of ease my situation. If I have lots of troubles, for instance, rent situation, and so forth and so on like that, the blues is the only thing that helps me...

Chorus: Well, what about the places where you don't have to pay rent?... Just on a plantation.
Leroy: Well, I still had troubles.

Natchez: Yeah, I know that.

Leroy: (Laughing) I mean women troubles and so forth and so on like that. Blues is the only thing that helps me... I mean, that's the only way to kind of ease my situation. If I have lots of troubles, for instance, rent situation, and so forth and so on like that, the blues is the only thing that helps me...

Chorus: Well, what about the places where you don't have to pay rent?... Just on a plantation.
Leroy: Well, I still had troubles.

Natchez: Yeah, I know that.

Leroy: (Laughing) I mean women troubles and so forth and so on like that. Blues is the only thing that helps me... I mean, that's the only way to kind of ease my situation. If I have lots of troubles, for instance, rent situation, and so forth and so on like that, the blues is the only thing that helps me...

Chorus: Well, what about the places where you don't have to pay rent?... Just on a plantation.
Leroy: Well, I still had troubles.

Natchez: Yeah, I know that.

Leroy: (Laughing) I mean women troubles and so forth and so on like that. Blues is the only thing that helps me... I mean, that's the only way to kind of ease my situation. If I have lots of troubles, for instance, rent situation, and so forth and so on like that, the blues is the only thing that helps me...

Chorus: Well, what about the places where you don't have to pay rent?... Just on a plantation.
Leroy: Well, I still had troubles.

Natchez: Yeah, I know that.

Leroy: (Laughing) I mean women troubles and so forth and so on like that. Blues is the only thing that helps me... I mean, that's the only way to kind of ease my situation. If I have lots of troubles, for instance, rent situation, and so forth and so on like that, the blues is the only thing that helps me...
Leroy: Yeah, yeah.
Natchez: He get up from way down the other end of the table and walk right down through the table and pick up what you got.
Leroy: Well, those guys, those guys, those guys they were what you call tough people, they know they got a whippin'.
Natchez: Pull the table and walk the table.
Leroy: Yeah, he knew he gonna get a whippin'. He pull that '45 on us, and when the white man comes, the white man whip him with his '45 on him... (Natchez: Yeah, yeah...) he didn't... while man wouldn't have no gun or anything (Natchez: That's it) he just say and say 'lay down there, feller, I'm gonna whip you...'
Natchez: Yeah, an' he lay right down...
Leroy: an' he whip him, and then he get up and probably knock his gun out of his scabbard... (Natchez: Yeah, holster) and then threw it up his scabbard after he get his whippin', put his gun back on. And the man... (Natchez: That's right) and come out on there and kill one of us or something.
Natchez: Yeah, yeah, yeah—that happens.
Leroy: In the mean time, if you was a good worker, you could kill anybody down there, so long as he's coloured (Natchez: yeah...) you could kill anybody—you could go anywhere.
Natchez: Yeah, that's right, you killed a Negro?
Leroy: Yeah, long as you killed a Negro.
Natchez: That's right, that's right.
Leroy: You could kill any Negro—if you could work better than him—don't kill a good worker... (Natchez: No) an' you were sorry.
Natchez: Yeah, that's right, yeah. What about those guys that come and got in the levee camps and extra gangs—
Leroy: An' huntin' around?
Natchez: Yeah. They'd call 'em dudes and a card sharks and things—
Leroy: Well, a lot of those fellows, they made good levee camp workers out of 'em, you know, these dudes and sharks—let of them they catch 'em. Course, a lot of these dudes and sharks, they go to the levee camps and they win your money and they kill you and they get away with it.
Natchez: Well, I know one—they call him Mississippi, he was a dude, and a worker killed him—a boy named Albert. Well, the story is this guy Mississippi came into All Time, Arkansas—it's the name of a town—and he was going with this boy's wife, Albert's wife, her name was Pinky, and so he went to the barrehouse that night, come in there at night about 12 o'clock; he came in there barrehouse and a gang of us was in there drinkin' and playin' and gambling, and Pinky was there, and he looked at Pinky and say 'Lookout, here's Mississippi'. So we all rangéd—some of us runnin' out the back, and run outside, and in the woods and different places; so I heard him say that 'I ain't come in here to raise no savy with nobody but Albert'. Say, 'I come here to get Pinky out. I'm going home and sleep with her tonight'. And she kept hollerin' say that she didn't want—a go with him, she wanted to go home with her husband... (Leroy: 'Yeah')... So, but anyway, he made her get out of there and go home and go home and go home and go home and go home, and she had for Pinky, and so he went on to this house, and carried Pinky on there, and him and Pinky went to bed; and Albert said those, see this window open, see, and Mississippi laying there asleep, you know. And he just crawled in the window, and went in there and shot him right through the head, killed him dead there, see.
(Sings) I remember when I was a little boy, Sittin' on my mother's knee, She often told me the story About that bad man, Stackerlee. She says, Son, he was a bad man, He's got a bullet man I know, Well, he killed Billy Lyons Blue steel 44.
It was late last night, Thought I heard my bull dog bark, Stagolee and Billy Lyons, Squabbin' in the dark. Say, they drug poor Billy Lyons, All up an' down old Murray Street, Poor boy was bloody and blue, 'Cause he had blown several to his feet. Stagolee told Miz Billy Lyons, 'You don't believe yo' man is dead, Why don't you look around the corner See what a hole he has in his head.'
kill a mule, I'll buy another one'. (Leroy: Yeah, yeah.) You know one of those things... You ever heard of that?

Leroy: Yeah, that occurred to me—on the three camps they say you know, they say you know, they say, 'Go out and take care, I'm going to look for him, he's in the woods.' And so, they got tired of carrying logs or something like that, you know, or clearing new ground, he say, 'Burn out, burn up. Fall out, fall dead.'

Natchez: That's right...

Leroy: Yeah. So we had a few Negroes down there that wasn't afraid of them people or talk back to them. They called those people crazy...

Natchez: ...crazy people... (Leroy: Yeah)...I wonder why they called them crazy because they speak up for his rights...

Leroy: Yeah, they called them crazy.

Natchez: I had an uncle like that and they hung him... They hung him down there because they say he was crazy and he might run the, the other Negroes. (Leroy: That's right.) See, and that is why they hung him, see, because he was a man, that if he worked he wanted pay; and he could figure as good as the white man, and he had a good a education as some of the white—better than some of the white people down there. (Leroy: Yeah)...cause a lot of them down there would come to him for advice.

Leroy: Yeah, the white people down there were just about, almost too scared to ask the Negro.

Natchez: I remember one time, my auntie, she had a baby, had a boy, see, he was about two or three, about two or three years old, yeah, see, and the white man come up there one day and he told him, he says, 'Say, Jerry' he says, 'I want you to get the woman out there and get her to tell my story.' He says, 'There's a woman in the yard; she don't work there, and she don't work in the field and work, but Mizz Anne, and I say, 'Well, who is Mizz Anne?' He says, 'Er, Mizz Anne is my wife.' He says, 'Well, I'm sorry, but my wife is named Anne, too, see, and she sit up in the shade, she got to come out.'

Natchez: And that one Mizz Anne is a Negro and she ain't going to work in the field'.

Leroy: And he jumps off his horse. Well, he whipped him—my uncle, whipped him, went off down the yard, and he went run his horse on a way, and then beat him up and run him away from there. So then went to town and get a gang and come out there after him that night, and shot all four, five of them, and they got away. So then they finally caught him.

Leroy: And hung him...

Natchez: Yeah. About fifty or sixty of them came out there and got him and killed him. That was on account of he was protecting his own wife, because he didn't want his wife to work out on the plantation... on the farm—his wife had a baby out there at the house to take care of, and she was expecting another one pretty soon, and he said that she wasn't too good to work because she was a Negro, she could work as good as any other Negroes on the place. That was the whole story about that.

Another man done gone...

Natchez: I've seen this. I've seen this happen, too, in the South, that one boy down there, he was, it was a white guy who was just walking down the street, and that this coloured boy was liking, and he told this coloured boy not to marry this coloured girl because she wanted him for his self, and the boy told him that he loved her and was going to marry her. He says, 'Well, you can't get no licence on this, you can't go any further, you'll have to get your marriage license, so go, and then they went up there and they got him and they come back there and the man ask him was he really married to her. And he said, 'Yes'. So the girl figured that if she show him the licence he would leave the room, then they went up there and they got him and they killed him, and then went back and got her, and she was in the family way was expecting a baby, and they killed her. Then they went and killed his daddy and they killed his mother, and then one of his brothers out to fight, to try to get the licence, and they killed them. So they killed twelve in that one family; that was in 19, 19, 1913. The boy was named Andrew, Andrew Belcher, that's the one they killed. The whole family was Belchers. Natchez: This is from Goulds, from Goulds Arkansas.

Leroy: They went out in the woods. Killed the whole family out there. If you got a family and they got a girl in the family that they like, you just let him have her, because if you don't he'll be liable to do something, you know, it's outrageous, because they see a Negro woman they like, they gonna have her if they want her.

Another man done gone...

Natchez: While a bad Negro in the South is a Negro that (stumbles) will really fight his own people...

Leroy: Anybody anywhere, see...

Natchez: Then the Negro that will white man, they call him crazy, they don't call him bad, see, because, fact of the business, they say he's gone nuts. The white man will call a Negro a bad seed anyway... and they say, you know, 'I don't know his name'.

Leroy: O yeah. He'd ruin the rest of the Negroes.

Natchez: Ruin the rest of the Negroes... you understand the point that I mean now. (Leroy: Yeah.) He would open the eyes of a lot of Negroes, tell 'em things that uh, that they, you know they didn't know.

Leroy: Otherwise he was a smart Negro.

Natchez: And he'd go around and get the Chicago Defender and bring it down there, you know what I mean, git it down there and read it to the Negroes.

Leroy: Yeah, speaking of the Chicago Defender, I were in a place called... (Natchez: Natchez: Hell, it's a lot of times they don't mean that, they—)

Natchez: That's what they really call a bad Negro. A Negro that have... (Natchez: Hell, you can imagine what they were doing back there. They were reading the Chicago Defender, and they had a man on the door, wid a...

Leroy: A lookout man...

Natchez: Yeah. Lookout man on the door with a peephole... (Natchez: Yeah. And if a white man or something come in the restaurant, they stick the Defender into the stove, burn it up and start playing checkers. (Natchez: Yeah.) That's what they had in the old George Defender. They used to have a bad Negro, a Negro who had nerve enough to smuggle the Chicago Defender down into the state of Mississippi where they didn't allow them to put 'em off there.

Natchez: Uhm—hmn—You see, that's what makes 'em so select... till today, because he has been denied in so many places until a gang is in place and they say 'You fellows get back' or 'get over there', or 'don't stand there' or something like that, they figger right straight that you—they're pointing out that they don't mean that... (Natchez: Yeah. And you know, I, they had a restaurant there in the back and they had a peephole. (Natchez: Yeah.) And I thought they were gambling back there or something, and I went back there to see was they gambling. In fact, I was kinda stranded. I wanted to—(Natchez: Hell, you didn't want nothing, just make me a little stake. (Natchez: Yeah.) And you can imagine what they were doing back there. They were reading the Chicago Defender, and they had a man on the door, wid a...}

Natchez: Where was that?

Sib: Jackson, Tennessee.

Natchez: Jackson, Tennessee.

Sib: The boss, he—we got it down there, the county road... they take you out on trucks, you know, and you build bridges, and you dig ditches and things like that you know. Course, they didn't use no chains... But err, he sold my mother a mule... and he gave me one... and then the mule and natchez, young boys, you know, I'd run the mule. Course, the mule, he was a nice lookin' mule. Well, finally, the mule, he got mired up in the bottom, you understand, and the mule dies...


Leroy: Is that the mule you married?

Sib: (Begins to stutter.)

Leroy: What you mean—mired up?

Sib: The mule got mired up—let me finish this.

Natchez: Now wait—wait a minute—in mud...

Sib: In quicksand.

Leroy: Is that the mule you bought the hot for? (Laughter)

Sib: They tell me this kid up and he died. So and—(Natchez: As this Cap'n Mack, he told my mother, say 'I'm just crazy to get that damn boy out there on the county road, I'm gon' do me like he did that mule'. So and then mother had to scuffle to...}