I Can Eagle Rock


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Made in the Czech Republic

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Jook joint blues from Alabama and Louisiana

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS RECORDINGS 1940-1941

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Remastered by Charlie Crump

Travelin’ Man

TM CD 09
Woods was an exponent of a local tradition of slide guitar playing (in open tuning, with the slider laid across the strings and the guitar across the lap). This was a technique used by Lead Belly (Huddie Leadbetter) and probably Willard “Ramblin” Thomas (originally from the Shreveport area) who had recorded for Paramount in 1928. Woods himself began a commercial recording career for Victor in 1930, in the company of Ed Schaffer (who played the guitar in similar style). ‘Buddy’ also cut sides for Decca in 1936 and Vocalion in 1937 and 1938. These were probably at the instance of the risque old-time music singer Jimmy Davis, whom Woods and Schaffer had accompanied at sessions for Victor in 1931 and 1932.

Although interviewed by Lomax, Woods gave none of this information. He told him, however, that he earned his living ‘down ’n’ around these little hop joints and things like that — where they having a good time’ by ‘passing the hat around’; stating he had been a street singer for about fifteen years. Presumably, therefore, it was this repertoire the Lomaxes encouraged ‘Buddy’ to sing when recording his music.

Don’t Sell It was the one title that Woods had recorded previously (for both Decca and Vocalion). A good-time dance piece, it was similar in tempo to Look Here Baby, One Thing I Got To Say; itself a reworking of an earlier recording, Bumble Bee Slim’s popular Hey Lawdy Mama, cut in 1935 (Decca 7126).

An interest in the Ballad Of The Boll Weevil probably prompted Lomax to request a song on this subject, and Woods obliged. As Paul Oliver has pointed out, however, Buddy performed a version of Ma Rainey’s Boll Weevil Blues, which she had recorded in 1923 (Paramount 12080).
There was only one conventional blues—the two recordings of *Sometimes I Get To Thinkin'*. The lyrics to this and his claim to the composition of *Don't Sell It* were duly reported in the expedition field notes, alongside an address—1403 Patzman (mail to 1526 Alston)—and the comment ‘calls himself “Troubadour” — “Street Rustler” ’.

In contrast, there was virtually nothing in the notes on Joe Harris or Kid West, just a bald statement that with Woods they were professional Negro guitarists and [blues] singers’ whose recordings were of songs used to ‘cajole nickels from the pockets of listeners’.

A few facts were gleaned, however, in interviews following some of their recordings. Joe Harris had lived in New Iberia and spoke French Creole. He was born in about 1888 and, therefore, in his fifties. Kid West (Paul Oliver discovered) was also a much older musician than Oscar Woods (born *circa* 1900). This may be the reason why Lomax decided to record them separately, for they were able to perform an earlier repertoire of rags, ragtime songs, ballads and other proto blues, in addition to the contemporary fashion. Harris played the guitar and West the mandolin.

*Baton Rouge Rag* by Harris is the same piece recorded in 1937 by Kitty Gray and her Wampus Cats. Composer credits to J. Harris and J. Davis (the old time music singer) and style of playing suggest Joe performed this with the group for Vocalion (although it was not issued until the 1970s). Harris told Lomax that he had learned the tune in Bunkie, Louisiana, from a trumpet player in 1907.

The blues performed by both West and Harris were generally wistful, understated and ironic. They showed knowledge of traditional stanzas, some of which can be traced in the recordings of greater-Texas songsters such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lead Belly.

Following their two days in Shreveport, John A. Lomax and his wife travelled north to Mooringsport in search of Lead Belly’s relatives. Here they found the singer’s aged Uncle Bob (an early influence). Infirm, Bob Leadbetter took them to see his grandson Noah Moore and they recorded a session in an Oil City hotel, close to the railroad tracks.

These recordings, and a few notes made by Lomax at the time, are all that is known of Moore, for he was killed in action during the Second World War. Lomax wrote:

Noah resembles Leadbelly physically (he would like to imitate him as a guitar player, but Noah works at his job too closely, he doesn’t practice “pickin’” enough.) All of Noah’s tunes are “Blues”, most of which he claims to have put together. As he played for us in Oil City the adoration of his comely wife who sat by, [and] the grave regard and esteem manifested by Uncle Bob, made the scene memorable.

Lomax’s interest in the repertoire of songsters presumably led him to comment adversely on Noah’s technique. On the evidence of his recordings Moore was a highly competent bluesman whose playing must have been much in demand for dances at the local jook joints. This is particularly evident in the long performances *Oil City Blues* and *Lowdown Worry Blues* (unique in their duration in this period). Noah is steadfast in his dance tempo and sustains the lyrical imagery in both of these extended blues. His rolling playing style, ‘with occasional bass string runs or hammered treble notes’ as Paul Oliver observes, recalls the music of the Texas guitarists ‘Funny Paper’ Smith (who made records in 1930-31 and 1935) and Lil’ Son Jackson (a post war
musician).

Noah's slide guitar technique recalls the local open-tuning tradition, especially *Settin' Here Thinkin'*, while *Jerry's Saloon Blues*, with its unusual reference to 'Texas Avenue and that moving picture show' utilises a line known from Lead Belly's *I Got Up In The Morning. Had To Get Up So Soon*. The provenance of the Memphis song *Mr. Crump Don't Like It* was not known to Noah, but some of his playing in this familiar barrelhouse piece recalls the rhythms and guitar licks of his elder cousin, Huddie.

From Oil City the Lomaxes travelled to Mississippi where they recorded Lucious Curtis and Willie Ford in Natchez (Travelin' Man TM CD 07) before they wended their way to Livingston, Alabama, and, eventually, Atlanta, Georgia.

Alabama has been ill served in the investigation of regional blues traditions. Recordings made for the Lomaxes by Tom Bell in 1940 are, therefore, doubly important. Again, Lomax field notes provide the little biographical information we have for this performer. According to these, Tom was the 'youngest son of a well-known thrifty matriarch'. He worked for a dairyman, milked many cows twice a day, and spent his spare time picking a guitar and singing for dances and other groups. He recorded...at two different periods, one after noon before milking time and again in the evening. Asked where he got the words for his songs, he said: 'Sometimes I puts these jes' what comes to mind.' Another time, another text.

As the titles to his performances indicate, Tom was an experienced dance musician, whose repertoire also included blues and ballad-like songs such as *Storm in Arkansas*. His playing recalls other Alabama musicians. This is true also for Robert Sonkin's recordings of a Washboard Trio (or the Mobile Washboard Band) made in 1941 for a project documenting the music of the Gee's Bend community in that state.

Good-time dance music was the purpose of this trio, who appear to have been from the circle of musicians that made up a string band called the Mobile Strugglers (recorded by William Russell for American Music in 1949 and Sam Charters in 1954 and 1955). The 1955 sides (issued by Folkways) included Virgil Perkins, who was a member of the Washboard Trio. *Red Cross Store* is a familiar Alabama theme and (on the evidence of Lead Belly) may contain verses that date from the First World War. The song was revived during the Depression by Lucille Bogan, Walter Roland and Sonny Scott, all Alabama musicians.

The performances collected by the Lomaxes in 1940 and Sonkin in 1941 was at a turning point in the evolution of rural black dance music. The economic boom occasioned by the Second World War encouraged migration from the south to urban centres in the north and west. In addition, amplified musical instruments and juke boxes blaring out the latest popular rhythm and blues recordings changed the character of dances and dancing in the jook joints.

This anthology epitomises styles superceded by the trends of a new decade, but they have a vitality and vibrancy as relevant today as the time they were recorded over fifty years ago.

John Cowley © 1995
I Can Eagle Rock
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1. I Can Eagle Rock, Lord I Can Ball the Jack
   - Tom Bell (2:17)
2. Look Here Baby, One Thing I Got to Say
   - Oscar Woods (2:23)
3. East Texas Blues
   - Joe Harris (1:55)
4. Oil City Blues
   - Noah Moore (9:00)
5. Kid West Blues
   - Kid West (2:31)
6. Sometimes I Get To Thinkin' (take 1)
   - Oscar Woods (3:00)
7. Cross E Shimmy Dance Tune
   - Tom Bell (2:42)
8. Settin' Here Thinkin'
   - Noah Moore (3:00)
9. Don't Sell It
   - Oscar Woods (2:09)
10. New York City Blues
    - Tom Bell (3:05)
11. A-Natural Blues
    - Kid West (2:39)
12. Lowdown Worry Blues
    - Noah Moore (11:41)
13. I'm Worried Now And I Won't Be Worried Long
    - Tom Bell (2:30)
14. Sometimes I Get To Thinkin' (take 2)
    - Tom Bell (1:33)
15. Corrina
    - Noah Moore (3:01)
16. Jerry's Saloon Blues
    - Washboard Trio (4:40)
    - [Mobile Washboard Band]
17. Red Cross Blues
    - Tom Bell (1:35)
18. C-Natural Blues
    - Oscar Woods (2:32)
    - Noah Moore (2:37)
20. Mr Crump Don't Like It
    - Joe Harris (2:28)
21. Baton Rouge Rag
    - Tom Bell (3:40)
22. Storm In Arkansas

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