During the summer of 1968 I spent a number of weeks with James 'Son' Thomas recording his blues repertoire and attempting to learn as much as possible about his views on blues, how he recalls verses when he sings at dances, and their relationship with religion.

James 'Son' Thomas was born on a farm in the red clay hills near Yazoo City, Mississippi, thirty-six years ago, and now lives with his wife and seven children in Leland. Though he has played blues guitar since childhood, he never traveled beyond the areas around Leland and Yazoo City until this past summer when I managed to find a place for him to perform at the Memphis Blues Festival.

Son is known as the best blues guitarist in the Leland area and plays regularly in blues joints at weekends. At present he works as a gravedigger in a local funeral home. The following excerpts from my discussions with him should be of interest to blues enthusiasts.

Ferris: Son, how do you put an idea into a verse when you are singing?

Thomas: Just like if you have a girlfriend or wife and you put a record out about them, which it is some out like that. About "When my first wife quit me and put me out on the road." Well, that "out on the road" means that's out on the road looking for another one (wife). You takes them verses and makes songs out of them. If somebody mistreats you, you can make a recording about them. See "You mistreat me now, you can't when I go home." That's the starting of a song and from then on you can put anything else you want after you give them the title of the record.

Just like the record comes out about "Baby please don't go." That's just like you got a wife and she packed up and getting ready to go. That's how blues started. It ain't very many blues made that ain't made up about a woman. It's a few ain't made up about a woman, but the most of them is "my baby this" or "my baby that."

Something like "The Little Honey Bee." You ever heard the record about the "Little Honey Bee?" "Sail on, little honey bee. Just keep on sailing and you'll lose your happy home." That's one of Muddy Waters' recordings. In other words he waddn't actually talking about a bee. He was talking about a woman, but he called her "my little honey bee."

Ferris: Where do you think the blues started?

Thomas: The blues is been out so long, you couldn't tell where it started at. My grandaddy, he was about seventy-five years old when he died and I used to hear him talk about the blues. Well they musta been blues before his time, cause they was blues when he was a was a boy. You can't never tell about that.

I think it always was. I hear them say the devil was in heaven one time and said the people was feeling in danger. The devil took his tail and drug down three-thirds of heaven while he was up there. That's why the Lord put him in a sealed-up place where he can't git out.

Ferris: Does the devil work with the blues?

Thomas: That's what it is. Nothing but the devil.

Ferris: Why do you say that, Son?

Thomas: Because in blues it ain't nothing toward the church. You wouldn't go to church and sing a blues song. You wouldn't do that. You wouldn't take a record and play a blues song in a church. But a spiritual song, you wouldn't mind playing up there.

In some places you go, they be playing records and somebody put on a church song and if somebody in that house got the devil in them, they say "Oh! Don't play no church song." They'll do that now.

Ferris: You say you don't belong to a church.

Thomas: Sure don't.

Ferris: Why is that?
Thomas: Well, I hadn't made up my mind to
join a church. I always say when I
join the church, I would lay all them
blues aside. Probably quit playing the
guitar period, because if you playing spi­
rituals and used to play blues, the next
thing you know the devil get in you and
you gonna start right back playing the
blues. I always say if I ever jine the
church, I'm gonner let all that go.

I used to gamble. I quit that. I used to
drink whiskey. I quit that. Now I drink
all the cold beer you can get there with.
But now I love the whiskey the best, but
it make me sick and that's the reason I
don't drink it. If I drink whiskey, I
can't eat nothing for two or three days.
Be weak, can't half-work, just make me
sick.

Ferris: Do you ever make up your own
blues?

Thomas: I have.

Ferris: How do you do that?

Thomas: Just think of you a verse and go
from there. From then on you can
skip around and do what you wanta do.

Ferris: If somebody beat you up and made
you mad, how would you write a
blues about that?

Thomas: Well, according to how that was,
see. It can be done, but I'd have
to think about it.

Ferris: Are there blues about bad men? You
said most of them are about women.

Thomas: I ain't never heard mar'n about
bad men, but they made it up about bad
whiskey. You ever heard that? "Bad whiskey
made me lose my happy home." Well, that's
been out. "Bad, bad whiskey made me lose
my happy home." 

Ferris: Why do people like the blues so
much?

Thomas: Well the way people play the
blues now, it'll make anybody
like them. Reverend Brown'll like them if
they play them right.

Ferris: But in the old days, was it the
music or what blues was talking
about that made people like them?

Thomas: Just like if you blue about some­
thing and you hear a good record
you like. You don't play nothing but that
record. Now say if you have a girlfriend
and she done gone off with some other boy,
well you maybe go to the jukebox and have
you some nickels in your pocket. Well it's

a certain record on that jukebox gonner
make you think about her. You ain't gonner
play nothing but that record. That's the
way that go.

Bill Ferris,
Vicksburg,
Mississippi.

Next Month:
"Lee Kizart Recalls The Delta Blues"

RARE POSTWAR RECORDS

Cleo Harves with Lightning Guitar
O. T. 105
"Skinny Woman Blues/Crazy with the Blues"

O.T. stood for Oklahoma Tornadoes, a hillbilly group led
by Virgil Bozman who recorded for Gold Star. He operated
O.T. at first from Westlake, a suburb of Lake Charles,
Louisiana, with the financial help of George Khoury. He
travelled all round Texas and Louisiana selling mounted
cow horns and would take his records with him. An early
release in 1949 by Nathan Abshire called "Pine Grove
Blues" established the company and several cajun and
hillbilly sides were issued, plus one known blues record
- O.T. 105 by Cleo Harves.

Cleo is a Texas sounding artist, playing rhythmic guitar
and singing forcefully. Aided by string-bass these are
fine sides, worthwhile country blues. Only Virgil could
tell us about Cleo, and he is now somewhere in San Ant­
onio. A good lead to his whereabouts would be Bob Tanner
of 'Tanner'n'Texas' (TNT) in that town. Lastly, this is
a very rare record...I know of only about four copies.

Photo - Mike Rowe
Text - Mike L.