

THE BLUES COME TO TEXAS

Ray Templeton celebrates the long-delayed fruition of one of the greatest of all blues publishing projects



Lone Star Hotel, Terrell, Texas, 1960. Photo: Paul Oliver.

"You goddam right I know that son of a bitch", said Lightnin' Hopkins explosively. "He's the one that killed my brother Abe. Ask me do I know Smith Casey? You goddam sure know I did. That son of a bitch ate my food, slept in my house, then went and kill my brother Abe. That bandy leg bastard shoulda been hung. He didn't have no nose cause the pox had eat it away and I did pray God that the pox could-a eat all stead of just his nose ... I would killed him myself if I could-a found him after he got out from the penitentiary."

To blues fans nowadays, Smith Casey was an obscure bluesman who sang for the Library of Congress at Huntsville Penitentiary in 1939, whose thrilling guitar technique and powerfully affecting vocals, clearly apparent even through the rough, cracked, often fragmentary recordings that survived in the Library's vault, made him one of the best that Alan Lomax ever recorded.



Paul Oliver and Alan Govenar. Photo: Kaleta Doolin, 2011.

What we didn't know when we were enjoying Casey's performances on those wonderful old Flyright/Matchbox LPs was that the reason Casey found himself in Huntsville was that he had shot Lightnin' Hopkins' brother to death, on Christmas day 1935, blasting him in the left breast from a distance of fourteen to sixteen feet, as he freely admitted in his evidence. Abe (pronounced 'Abbie') Hopkins had hit him with a club the previous week, he said, and was now threatening him with a knife, although other witnesses saw no such weapon.

Details of Smith Casey's early days, his musical career (including a spell as Abe Hopkins' partner), his crime, his sentence, his illness, his release, his later life and his subsequent death have been collated from a wide range of sources – interviews, legal documents, prison records etc. – and cover two and a half tightly packed pages of this extraordinary book. In a large-format volume of 450 pages, Casey's occupies just a very small corner, but the thoroughness, the detail, the immediacy of the narrative and the voices of its participants, are all indicative of the value and importance of this work, the commitment of its authors and their prodigious achievement.

Background

I don't often cheer when a book arrives in the post, but I did with this one. Around the beginning of the 1960s, Paul Oliver in London and Robert 'Mack' McCormick in Houston let it be known that they were collaborating on a definitive history of blues in Texas. As it turned out, it would never be published in their lifetime, but quite early on, its non-appearance became a frequent cause for remark in blues circles. Reviewers of albums of Texas blues for which either Oliver or McCormick wrote the sleeve notes (and there were plenty of them) would always take the opportunity to mention it. I doubt if, in the history of blues writing, any other unpublished project has been mentioned so often, and so wistfully.

This is not the place for detail about the book's history (not least because it's so long and complicated, and stormy, as described within), but a few words on the subject are necessary. The sheer scale and ambition of the original authors' intentions was one of the factors that made the task so daunting, but there were other issues, too. Oliver, who did most of the actual writing in the book, was a full-time academic (in quite different fields) and published no fewer than ten other books on aspects of the blues, most of which post-date the announcement of a book on Texas blues, as well as countless articles, sleeve notes etc. McCormick was very different, with what Govenar describes as 'a jazzman's approach to life', a rather more precarious existence, but one which allowed him the time and space to carry out almost inconceivably prodigious amounts of first-hand research and interviews.

On paper, all this might seem like an ideal combination, but in 'An Open Letter' to *Blues Unlimited* in 1976, McCormick declared that collaboration between two writer/researchers, especially given the difficulties of cross-



Mack McCormick, circa 1970. Photo: Fred Bunch.

Atlantic co-operation, rather than halving the work, '... doubles it, and threatens now to make it impossible'. Now, in the age of electronic communications and the wealth of archive records etc. available in online databases, it is difficult to appreciate the hurdles involved, even in ostensibly quite straightforward-seeming activities.

The project came to a halt around that time. Now, we have Alan Govenar, with Kip Lornell, to thank for taking on the task of bringing what we might loosely describe as the manuscript (huge quantities of papers in all sorts of states of completion and physical condition) to a state where it could be published. Govenar's extensive introduction details this history, and he and Lornell also provide a 'prelude', which among other things includes biographical sections on each of the authors. It is acknowledged that in a sense, the book is 'a

historical artefact', presented to the reader with all its gaping holes and its ragged edges on show. Notes in the text indicate where there were parts missing in the manuscript, sometimes indicating quite sizeable gaps, or frequent and tantalising marginal annotations.

Anachronisms (and what Govenar calls Oliver's 'Britishisms') remain; for example – controversially but I think justifiably – the use of words such as 'Negro', quite respectable usage in the 1960s. All this is true – it is clearly unfinished and pretty rough in places, and its background is ideal fodder for the new school of blues research in which the writers are as interesting as their subjects, but don't let that fool you. By the time it was abandoned it was already a quite astonishingly exhaustive work of information and analysis, surely one of the truly great works of blues scholarship.

The Book

It's a large format book, 22 x 28cm, and you can effectively double the pagination given in the citation, as every page is in two columns, each as packed with text as the whole pages of most other books, if not more (the font is quite small and tightly packed). It seems that final decisions about the shape of the book were never taken, so some structural oddities remain, but following Oliver's preface, it is divided into two 'volumes' (in the one binding), the first being where much of the biographical material can be found and the second putting the music and musicians into a broader historical and cultural context – origins, musical influences, politics, religion, repertoire, instruments, recording etc. The Civil War, population movements, agricultural practices – all of these played a part in the formation of blues in Texas, and are given attention here.

The project's scope was flexible in some directions, restricted in others. The authors' working definition of 'Greater Texas', takes in parts of Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma, while 'blues' is flexible enough to include Blind Willie Johnson, Arizona Dranes and Washington Phillips, for example, who recorded only religious music.

On the other hand, a general leaning towards older, more traditional styles means that a lot of 1940s and 1950s Texas blues and r&b is overlooked. Zuzu Bollin, for example, is mentioned only briefly, others like Goree Carter and Little Willie Littlefield not at all. Also, the chronology effectively ceases round about the time that the collaboration started. Texan artists whose fame was only beginning at the time the project was conceived – Hop Wilson or Juke Boy Bonner, for example, or the then up-and-coming Texas guitar stylists like Albert Collins – are either not mentioned, or only touched on in passing. The chronological limitations also mean that some things have been superseded by subsequent research. Some might reasonably feel that this suggests an old-fashioned perspective, but that's

scarcely surprising for a project that started sixty years ago. In any case, the imagination boggles at the scale of the project, had its scope been extended in these ways.

Connections

Mack McCormick's approach to his subject was partly informed by a predilection for making connections, which plays an important role in shaping the narrative here. Not all of these are as dramatic as that between Lightnin' Hopkins and Smith Casey, but the dense weave of such connections finds names cropping up at different points, illustrating different aspects, or linking with different people.

T-Bone Walker's, for example, take in a wide range of disparate Texas musicians, including Coley Jones and the Dallas String Band (one of whose members, Marco Washington, was T-Bone's step-father), pianists like Conish 'Pine Top' Burks and Son Becky, as well as Texas Alexander, Blind Lemon and a young Clarence Garlow. Exploring Walker's adoption of an electric guitar even takes us into an encounter with Dallas-born Charlie Christian.

J.T. 'Funny Paper' Smith, 'The Howling Wolf', was never a big name like T-Bone – in fact his real name was something else altogether, as we discover here – but his story emerges from his sister's memories and a string of connections that include Texas Alexander again and Lowell Fulson, and on to Manny Nichols, James Tisdome and – most intriguingly – maybe even Rattlesnake Cooper. The mass of information about minor figures, names we know only because they made perhaps one or two records or played accompaniment for others, is almost breathtakingly impressive – like Carl Davis or Lee Hunter ('his head was well nigh as big as his body', said an interviewee), or Leroy Johnson – the list goes on and on. And that's not to mention the huge number of complete unknowns who populate these pages and make them crackle with life, like pianist Cross-Eyed Willie: "They called him that to his face ... his eyes were pinching his nose" or blind guitarist Eddie Livingston, who played with a young Lemon Jefferson, and whose mother was a fortune-teller. These are just two completely at random. Still, gaps are inevitable – one of the annotated gaps in the manuscript, for example, has Oliver noting a lack of information on Buddy Lewis and Pete McKinley.

In the deep store of interview material, mostly never published before (as is well known, Mack McCormick guarded his resources very carefully) anecdotes abound. We hear of 'Little Hat' Jones, an avid Charlie Chaplin fan, impersonating the film star by twirling his guitar like a cane and wearing a little derby hat. John Hogg tells of his brother Smokey putting a rattlesnake rattle inside his guitar – "Gives it more of a ring. You hit down on it – it sounds about as loud again", Buster Pickens (a very prolific informant, quoted often in these pages) remembered that the pianist Si Ford, aka Papa Si, from Kilgore, Texas " ... always played a thing that he'd shout 'Hold it, you bastard', all through".

The messy realities of life are part and parcel of telling blues history, such as when Sippie Wallace (The Texas Nightingale) recalled the early death of piano player Edgar Perry, putting it down to constipation: " ... maybe a dose of Epsom salts would have saved him." Leon Benton told of how Texas Alexander's song 'Crossroad Blues' (which he recorded with Benton's Busy Bees in 1950) was inspired by the time their car broke down on the way back from playing for employees on Tom Moore's farm ("he had a regular dance hall and tavern, right there on the farm"). They played there once a month, and Alexander would sing his song about Moore " ... if it looked like none of the Moore brothers were around". Tom Moore is remembered elsewhere in the book, too, in tales of vicious treatment and worse.



Juke Boy Bonner, Houston, 1960. Courtesy Blues Unlimited.



Whistlin' Alex Moore, 1960. Photo: Paul Oliver.

Songs

Connections are explored in all sorts of other ways, through songs, for example, such as Texas versions of songs with links back to the old world, like 'The Derby Ram' ('He Rambled' – great version recorded by Pete Harris in Richmond, Texas in 1934) and 'St. James Infirmary' (Mance Lipscomb learned his version in 1929), widespread American items like 'The Boll Weevil' and more specifically Texan material like 'Ella Speed' (known to Wright Holmes, although he never recorded it), 'Hattie Green' and 'The Midnight Special' (linked here somehow to an actual hold-up in Houston). We can see a song like 'Matchbox Blues', or at least, its title verse, crop up at various points, on its way from Blind Lemon's original recording to its popularity among the Western Swing bands. 'Black Gal' was best known for the version by Joe Pullum, but Texas musicians knew that prior to his 1934 recording, it was properly associated with Hersal Thomas and Andy Boy.

Stylistic links to the other musics that abounded in Texas – native-American traditions (many blues singers in 'greater Texas' had native American parents or grandparents, from Lead Belly to Lowell Fulson), jazz, spirituals, Mexican, Cajun and more – form further fruitful areas for investigation. Not surprisingly, for Texas, cowboy songs get some attention. John Lomax's pioneering book from 1910 included many from black singers, and some shared lines and verses are noted – the version of 'Jack O'Diamonds' published by Lomax includes several sections familiar from blues, for example. Those familiar with Paul Oliver's work will not be surprised to hear that the survival in Texas of influences from Africa is also considered, linking through for example, to the unaccompanied singing of Texan prisoners recorded by the Lomaxes, Moses 'Clear Rock' Platt and James 'Iron Head' Baker. These men also knew versions of old British ballads like 'Barbara Allen' and 'The Farmer's Curs't Wife', another illustration of the rich weave of association throughout these pages.

The birth of mass media increased the potential for associations still further, as well as in new directions, and for an idea of the attention to detail here, consider that we find such nuggets of information as that as late as 1944 there were only thirty cinemas for black audiences in the whole of Texas (and also that Whistlin' Alex Moore loved Westerns). Radio also made a big difference in the decade before the war. Joe Pullum 'sang over all the stations in Houston', his repertoire encompassing material from downhome blues to '... the same kind of stuff as Guy Lombardo'. Through him, accompanists such as Andy Boy and Rob Cooper were also broadcasting, not to mention unrecorded pianists such as Willie Mae Brown, another source of reminiscences. The new technologies accelerated the spread of styles and materials, and records, of course, were expanding musicians' horizons; Ivory Joe Hunter talks of how he absorbed so much of the blues: "My cousin had a whiskey store and he had a Victrola standing in the doorway. So he used to get all the new blues records, soon as they come out ... So I'd be standing there turning the handle and putting on the records. All day long ..."

The Piano Blues

Texas piano styles were a particular interest of Paul Oliver's, and woven through the book is the feast of information, exploration and analysis that has been so long anticipated. Some of the formative players recorded, some did not, but the fame of pioneers like Scanlin Smith, Peg Leg Will, George Thomas lived on in the memories of interviewees long after they had gone. Peg Leg taught Buster Pickens, who recalled how older men would respond when he asked them how to do something: "Aw, you thick head – just look what I'm doing ... now you see that, well you do that and you got it". The reader can follow the connections, from stylists of the Santa Fe school like Black Boy Shine, Black Ivory King and more, to Dallas players like Will Ezell and Alex Moore, who was known as Papa Chittlin to the young Curtis Jones who considered Moore "the best bluesman I ever saw ... I gathered my piano from [him]".

Robert Shaw was an important source of information, his memory over-spilling with names and places, and music – the album he recorded for McCormick in 1963 is one of the great treasures of Texas blues. In Mercy Dee Walton's successful career in blues and rhythm and blues, his style still reflected the musical heritage that derived from people like DeLoatch Maxey ("a terrific blues singer" he recalled) and Grey Ghost (who played "... the deep, deep blues. The real country blues"). Note that the Grey Ghost who recorded in the 1980s was another man altogether, and the authors were already aware that there was more than one, at least a decade before.

Charles Brown was never a Texas blues piano stylist, as such, but he was born in Texas City, and we do get a typically Oliver-style attempt to analyse his peculiar vocals, which concludes: "... if there was a hint of a yawn in his voice, it was a yawn of hopelessness rather than of boredom".

This is a great big, bubbling cauldron of a book, almost boiling over with its rich proliferation of good ingredients, and a review like this can barely suggest even a teaspoonful of what's in there. It is tempting to go on pulling out tasty morsels – there are so many, all through the book – but we have to stop somewhere.

As a source, the book's importance is incalculable and it will be an important reference for as long as people want to look up information about the blues. It is, of course, more than simply a work of reference, and its power to draw the reader in to follow its seemingly limitless trails is unparalleled in any other blues literature I can think of. It would be unfair to call a book that retails at more than a hundred pounds an essential purchase, but anyone who has loved the blues of Texas in its myriad forms should make every effort to read it (I'm painfully aware that the libraries in this country are not what they were, but they're definitely worth a try). Pound for pound (or dollar for dollar), its value still sets it head and shoulders above the current proliferation of books about the blues.

A final note (acknowledgments to Phil Wight for spotting it): that's Brother John Sellers, not Brownie McGhee, with Oliver and Broonzy in the photo on page 223.

Ray Templeton was reviewing 'The Blues Come To Texas' (Paul Oliver and Mack McCormick's Unfinished Book) Compiled by Alan Govenar with Documentation and Essays by Alan Govenar and Kip Lornell Texas A&M University Press, 2019; 457 pages; Illustrated; ISBN 978 1 62349 638 8; £102 (£69.06 Kindle)

