

BLUES **UNLIMITED**

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RECORDS

COMPLETE RECORDINGS: 1928-1935

Robert Wilkins
Wolf (Austria) WSE111

Rolling Stone - Parts 1 & 2/Jail House Blues/I Do Blues/That's No Way to Get Along/Alabama Blues/Long Train Blues/Falling Down Blues/Nashville Stone-wall Blues/Police Sergeant Blues/Get Away Blues/I'll Go with Her Blues/Dirty Deal Blues/Black Rat Blues/New Stock Yard Blues/Old Jim Canan's/Losin' Out Blues

Wolf Records continue the good library-building work by bringing together all the original Robert Wilkins recordings on one disc.

On the all too brief but valuable sleeve notes Oliver describes his meeting with the one-time blues singer, and a tense one it appears to have been. 'I left the world forty years ago,' Wilkins claimed, 'and don't care to call those days to mind', before showing the interviewer to the door.

What he left for posterity is tantalisingly brief.

The collection kicks off with Parts 1 and 2 of *Rolling Stone*, a slow sad blues with an incessant clipped guitar I always find so reminiscent of train rhythms. Apparently this piece earned Wilkins the 'honour' of being the first black artist to appear on radio in Memphis with listeners ringing up for him to keep on playing. Wilkins recorded on several later occasions but he was hardly prolific.

For myself I prefer his more uptempo songs such as the *Poor Boy*-like rolling of *That's No Way to Get Along* and the *Stack o'Lee*-tinged *Alabama Blues*. He seems to have had a rather wider set of venues than most, from children's parties to police balls. Maybe then he was a brighter songster. From what is available now, you would hardly think so. His blues are pretty morose affairs - but no less impressive for that.

Wilkins' guitar style was not particularly innovative. There is plenty of Garfield Akers in *Get Away Blues*, with its rock steady beat, and Charlie Patton-type picking on *Jail House Blues*. Still, in both cases Wilkins' treatment shows he did much more than simply imitate. The phrasing is erratic and loose but never detracts from his singing. And it's a voice that really tells, with its steady expression and sustained vibrato. This was clearly a man who took his music but seriously! I particularly enjoyed his graveyard blues *I'll Go with Her*, a melancholy tale of lost love delivered in harrowing tones.

In 1935 he recorded *Old Jim Canan's*, a celebration of the joint run by Jim Kinnane with its 'whiskey drinking, cocaine sniffing women', but his heart does not seem to be in it. Soon after he knocked it on the head and retired from blues to preach and sell herbal remedies. Why? 'In blues it's what you call a felt inward feeling of your own self - It's universal - but it don't bring you joy in the spirit.' I can say no more!
Michael Grenfell

IN MY GIRLISH DAYS

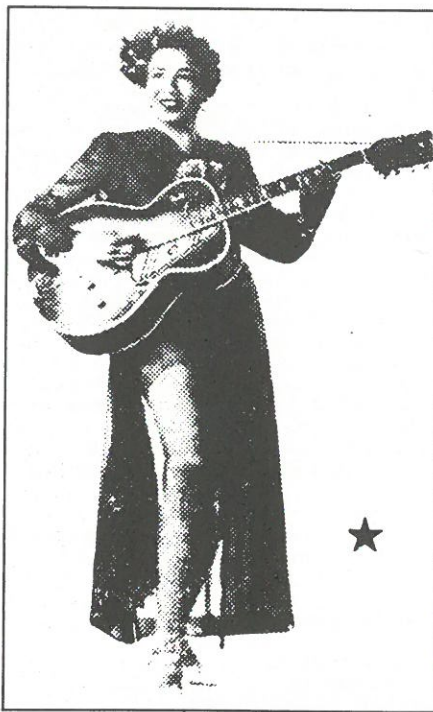
Memphis Minnie
Travelin' Man (UK) TM803

She Wouldn't Give Me None/Mr Tango Blues/I'm Gonna Bake My Biscuits/What Fault You Find of Me? Parts 1 & 2/I'm Talking About You/Bumble Bee/Fishin' Blues/Kind Treatment Blues/I'm Talking About You No. 2/Jailhouse Trouble Blues/Keep It to Yourself/Dirty Mother for You/Sylvester and His Mule Blues/You Can't Give It Away/You Wrecked My Happy Home

Memphis Minnie and her husband Kansas Joe McCoy enjoyed a hit with their first Vocalion release, *I'm Talking About You/Bumble Bee* (Vo 1476). Yet its follow-up, the two-part *What Fault You Find of Me?* (1500), and their next, *I'm Gonna Bake My Biscuits/Mr Tango Blues* (1512), evidently went nowhere, and today both are distinctly scarce. What fault did the race-record public find of them?

All the data you are ever likely to have is provided on this LP. *What Fault* proves to be slow, lugubrious, a little dull; *Biscuits*, though recorded earlier, suffers from being released after *I'm Talking About You*, whose melody it largely shares; and *Mr Tango* may have been too obscurely specific. Not altogether surprisingly (look at Jim Jackson, Leroy Carr and others), the team's next success was with explicit remakes, *Bumble Bee No. 2* and *I'm Talking About You No. 2*. The latter, included here, prompts sleeve-note-writer Alan Balfour to claim 'it made the original pale into insignificance'. It's certainly a storming performance, with particularly robust and assertive seconding by the sometimes quiet (or under-recorded) Kansas Joe. Much of its energy was still a year and a half later when the pair cut *Fishin' Blues*; note Joe's descending figures in the instrumental chorus.

Minnie's music changed after her separation from



Memphis Minnie

Joe (though you can detect a certain impatience with their routines in some earlier recordings, a slight tendency to play as if Joe wasn't there; something of that comes across in *Jailhouse Trouble Blues*), and she stepped easily enough into a role that must have pleased her commercial sponsors (who may even have wished it upon her), that of a female Big Bill. This period is better covered by other reissues, such as the first Blues Classics set - the *Travelin' Man* makes no claim to be representative, being concerned rather to plug gaps with rarities - and the 1935 cuts *Dirty Mother*, *Sylvester* and *You Can't Give* are untypical anyway, with their odd pianist. *Sylvester* is a curious composition, almost a little folk-tale, and seems to me to have the ring of topicality, as if it were based on a news-story of the time.

TM admits that some rough originals had to be used. *She Wouldn't Give Me None* is rather viciously top-cut for my taste, and a somewhat brighter copy of *I'm Talking About You/Bumble Bee* might have been located, but overall the sound-quality is reasonable.
Tony Russell

COUNTRY BLUES - THE FIRST GENERATION

Papa Harvey Hull & Long Cleve Reed, Richard 'Rabbit' Brown
Matchbox (UK) MSE201

Gang of Brown Skin Women/France Blues/Two Little Tommie Blues/Don't You Leave Me Here/Mama You Don't Know How/Original Stack o'Lee Blues (Papa Harvey Hull & Long Cleve Reed)/*James Alley Blues/ Never Let the Same Bee Sting You Twice/I'm Not Jealous/Mystery of the Dunbar Child/Sinking of the Titanic* (Richard 'Rabbit' Brown)

The emergence of the blues as the dominant form of secular black music probably occurred in the first decade of this century. Before that time embryonic blues forms coexisted with ragtime tunes, coon and vaudeville songs, folk ballads and rural dance pieces in a catholic jumble which constituted the repertoire of the songsters - versatile, eclectic rural entertainers who worked country dances, travelling and tent shows, bars and street corners. A surprising number of them, including Charlie Patton, Henry Thomas and Jim Jackson, recorded extensively enough to allow latter-day listeners a detailed insight into their musical world - a world which has been explored in fascinating and authoritative manner by Paul Oliver in *Songsters & Saints*. This album, annotated by Oliver, is a useful adjunct to the book, reissuing the work of three obscure songsters whose records are discussed in it.

As with many albums in this and similar reissue projects, the titles are presented in chronological order, but whereas this has often made for monotonous listening, here it further emphasises the very variety of the songsters' repertoire.

The records of the quaintly named Long Cleve Reed and Papa Harvey Hull reveal their awareness of

both old folk traditions and what were, in 1920s, currently popular commercial styles. Thus *Don't You Leave Me Here* is a variant of the widely collected *Alabama Bound*, while the jaunty *Gang of Brown Skin Women*, on the theme of a woman for every day of the week, features some delightful stagey 'scat' singing which Oliver suggests reflects the influence of popular vocal quartet music. Similarly, they performed *Two Little Tommies*, which hints at the 12-bar blues form and at the same time offered *Mama You Don't Know How*, which lyrically, vocally and instrumentally echoes Lemon Jefferson's 1926 hit *That Black Snake Moan*. This confident handling of traditional tunes and 'up to the minute' hits seems to be characteristic of the songsters' approach to music.

Reed, Hull and their sometime guitarist Sunn Wilson are shadowy figures whose provenance is unclear, but as Oliver notes their dextrous picking and strongly rhythmic playing points to 'the hill country of North Mississippi', and I believe that *Original Stack o'Lee Blues* supports this view. This bad-man ballad was performed by a number of commercially recorded artists, including John Hurt, whose rendition is outstanding. The Hull-Reed version, though lyrical unlike Hurt's, bears in its gentle vocal and rolling instrumental parts a startling and uncanny resemblance to his rendering. The 1927 Reed-Hull side predates Hurt's by one year, but as their record is notoriously rare, I suspect that the influence was direct. Perhaps like Hurt, Cleve Reed and Harvey Hull came from the hill town of Avalon; I wonder if anyone ever asked Hurt about them. Whatever the truth, these few side possess an engaging charm and freshness which should be enjoyed by all country blues fans.

Richard 'Rabbit' Brown is somewhat less of a mystery, having been researched by Samuel Charters in the '50s. Brown was a street 'serenader' from New Orleans, where he made his one session in 1927. He possessed a coarse, deep voice and a lugubrious delivery, which were augmented by his resonant, deft guitar accompaniment, and his records are intriguing.

The splendid, oft-reissued *James Alley* is his only true blues and on the recorded evidence uncharacteristic of his repertoire. Both the verse structure and content of *Never Let the Same Bee Sting You Twice* and *I'm Not Jealous* indicate their vaudeville origins, but it is perhaps characteristic of a naive like Brown that he treats the essentially comic battle of the sexes depicted in *Same Bee* in a serious manner. This solemnity of treatment is better suited to the sombre subject of *The Sinking of the Titanic*, a graphic narrative account of a disaster which provoked much moralising comment or records. By contrast, his *Mystery of the Dunbar Child* is unique, for it is a probably self-composed topical ballad about a 1915 kidnapping. Intrinsically interesting as it is, it also offers an insight into the songster's role as chronicler of local events.

Although most of these titles have been previously reissued in piecemeal fashion, this gathering of them offers an opportunity to grasp the essential character of the songster's art, and should be welcomed as such. The sound quality is adequate and the album is both entertaining and instructive. It is worthy of serious consideration. **Henry Thomas**

MEMPHIS HARMONICA KINGS 1929-30
The Complete Recordings in Chronological Order of Noah Lewis and Jed Davenport
Matchbox (UK) MSE213

Chickasaw Special/Devil in the Woodpile/Like I Want to Be (Noah Lewis)/*Ticket Agent Blues/New Minglewood Blues/Selling the Jelly/Bad Luck's My Buddy* (Noah Lewis' Jug Band)/*I'm Sittin' on Top of the World/Talkin' Bout Yo-Yo* (Beale Street Rounders)/*How Long How Long Blues/Cow Cow Blues* (Jed Davenport)/*Beale Street Breakdown/You Ought to Move Out of Town/The Dirty Dozen/Jug Blues/Save Me Some/Piccolo Blues* (Jed Davenport & His Beale Street Jug Band)

Among the great Memphis harp-players Noah Lewis stands for lyricism, Will Shade for jauntness and Jed Davenport for drive. Lewis touches your heart, Shade makes you skip and grin, but Davenport grabs you by the lapels and hauls you into the turbulence of a Beale Street Saturday 50 years ago.

Few jugband sessions have the sustained excitement of Davenport's 1930 Vocalion date; only the Memphis Jug Band's '34 Okeh swansong is really comparable, and by then the intimations of swing were loosening jugband rhythms. Davenport's sidemen keep a stricter, though still springy, beat - sometimes the easy-rocking pulse of a Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe performance (a suggestive comparison - listen to *You Ought to Move Out of Town* or the guitar intro of *The Dirty Dozen* - but I'll abstain from speculation

he always seemed to be in the same sombre mood. Perhaps if he had played guitar there might have been more of the songster about him, but as it was his musical antecedents were the dour worksongs and prison chants.

His blues were all at the same slow tempo. Rushed intros by Little Hat Jones may have been a vain attempt to speed him up but were more likely a crude copy of Blind Lemon's varying use of tempos. Whatever, Texas ignored it anyway. Whilst Lonnie Johnson was his most skilled accompanist there is a lot to like about Little Hat Jones's trademarks, the fast intro and cascading guitar riffs, which seem to sit more comfortably under Texas's very country blues. The later groups on record injected more variety, like the Mississippi Sheiks who brightened up his return session in 1934, or guitarists Willie Reed and Carl Davis, who seemed to smooth out Alexander's rough edges with their immaculate accompaniment to *One Morning* and *Deceitful Blues*.

His lyrics were always interesting but it's difficult to tell if they were original or if, being so early to recording, he was merely putting down a common stock of blues verses. But hidden in his songs are phrases like 'Going to Louisiana, get me a mojo hand' and, intriguingly, in *Farm Hand* (1927), 'Scared to go down that big road by myself'.

Alger's story is a sad one. He seems to have served time for murder in the late '30s, which may explain why his 1934 sessions were his last prewar recordings, and local difficulties allegedly caused by public performance of his explicitly sexual songs saw him briefly in jail again in 1942. A last chance disappeared when he was left out of a trip to California to record for Aladdin in 1946 and his only postwar record was for Freedom in Houston in the early '50s. With Buster Pickens on piano and the unknown Leon Benton on electric guitar *Bottoms Blues* was memorable only for his still defiant lyrics: 'I ain't no Christian man and I don't wanna be baptised'. He was almost certainly a sick man by then for in 1954 Texas Alexander died of syphilis.

Considering these three albums it must be said that Alexander is not best served by the Matchbox philosophy of single-artist, chronological and complete presentation and inevitably the Agram must have the edge for its greater variety alone. The original research and painstaking production are further reasons to commend it. Texas's blues are not 'easy' and many collectors might feel they only need one Texas Alexander record, which would be a pity. There is a wealth of fine music on the Matchboxes and, perversely, I'm looking forward to Volume 3 and especially Volume 4.

Mike Rowe

RAMBLIN' THOMAS 1928-32

Matchbox (UK) MSE215

So Lonesome/Hard to Rule Woman Blues/Lock and Key Blues/Sawmill Moan/No Baby Blues/Ramblin' Mind Blues/No Job Blues/Back Gnawing Blues/Jig Head Blues/Hard Dallas Blues/Ramblin' Man/Poor Boy Blues/Good Time Blues/New Way of Living Blues/Ground Hog Blues/Shake It Gal

Ramblin' Thomas was an early subject for reissue – the half-LP on Heritage and half-EP on Jazz Collector are the best part of 30 years old – and this made it possible for him to be appreciated, as Paul Oliver observes, by a non-collector like Langston Hughes, but curiously it did not bring a posse of researchers on his trail. Perhaps it isn't so curious, at that: the '60s investigations into the whereabouts of the great Mississippi bluesmen were driven by the rarity of their records, whereas Thomas could be heard at length by any punter with a couple of pounds in his pocket, and though his mystery remained it was that much less enticing.

The literacy that Langston Hughes probably admired, Thomas's crisp and interesting use of language, is matched by his care for structure. Verses are linked together, and whole songs fitted to their guitar accompaniments, with a studiousness for which present-day listeners, hearing them *en masse* as they were never meant to be heard, may well be grateful. The essential Ramblin' Thomas 'sound' may not vary, but he is seldom repetitive or uninteresting in detail.

The 14 Paramount sides, recorded at two sessions in early and late 1928, are evenly divided into songs with standard guitar accompaniment and those with slide. The former sometimes suggest Blind Lemon Jefferson, explicitly in *No Baby*, or, at the second session, Lonnie Johnson (*Jig Head, Hard Dallas*). Unlike his younger brother Jesse, Ramblin' Thomas was reluctant to play, or at least record, fast numbers, and the Jefferson devices are made less recognisable by being slowed down, as in *Good Time*.

The slide pieces are in the local style we associate

with Oscar Woods, whom Thomas doubtless knew when he lived in Shreveport. Several of them contain figures related to such Woods pieces as *Lone Wolf Blues*, and it is only the dulling and condensing effect of the Paramount recording process that robs Thomas's playing of the chordal amplitude we hear in Woods or his follower Black Ace. Having said that, I should add that overall the transfer quality is quite reasonable, though, oddly, the second Paramount session sounds fainter and more pre-electric than the first.

The last two tracks are half of the 1932 Dallas session (which, incidentally, must have brought Thomas together with Woods again, since the other man was there to record with Jimmie Davis) and benefit from Victor's superior recording quality. Both are slide pieces, *Ground Hog* in the manner we now know but *Shake It Gal* a new kind of number, a fast dance piece related to the Mississippi *Strut It Now/Strered Gal* songs.

Tony Russell

COMPLETE RECORDINGS: 1929-36

Blind Roosevelt Graves
Wolf (Austria) WSE110

St. Louis Rambler Blues/Guitar Boogie/New York Blues/Bustin the Jug/Crazy About My Baby/Staggerin' Blues/Low Down Woman/Take Your Burdens to the Lord/Telephone to Glory/I Shall Not Be Moved/When I Lay My Burdens Down/Sad Dreaming Blues/Woke Up This Morning/Hittin' the Bottle Stomp/Skippy Whipply/Dangerous Woman/I'll Be Rested/Barbecue Bust

Despite its title, this is mostly a record of the Graves brothers, Roosevelt and his younger brother Uaroy, playing with various other musicians. Really it falls into three sections: a group recorded in July 1929; a set of juke joint music as part of the Mississippi Jook Band; and a couple of gospel songs as a duo.

These last two are probably the most interesting. The guitar picking is clean and inventive and Roosevelt's growling vocals come to the fore. With just the two of them it is also easier to appreciate Uaroy's tambourine rhythms. Unfortunately, half a dozen similar recordings were left unissued and are now presumed lost.

The rest of the record is entertaining enough, though. The 1929 session produced 18 tracks, on most of which the Graves brothers are accompanied by Baby James on cornet and Will Ezell on piano. Indeed, Paramount issued four of the tracks under the latter's name. The loose way the group appears to have come together is reflected in the informal feel of the session. *Guitar Boogie* is a version of *Pine Top's Boogie Woogie* and is perhaps inappropriately titled, as the most distinguished playing comes from piano rather than guitar. However, this was only the first of the session, which continues in the same four-man mould; the rag-timed *Bustin the Jug* and Charles A. Tindley's gospel song *Take Your Burden to the Lord* being particularly notable.

In all but two cases the recordings are of good quality. Of those two we must, as always, be grateful that they are still extant but I cannot imagine anyone sitting through them more than once. The sound on these is thick and muddy. It is possible to distinguish between guitar and piano – but only just!

The record really comes alive with their 1936 Hattiesburg session. Here they are accompanied by Cooney Vaughn on piano and appear as the Mississippi Jook Band – the only occasion, according to Oliver, when a black band or artists used the name 'Jook' or 'Juke' on record. These four tracks are nicely interspersed with the two gospel songs.

The record would be worth purchasing for these six tracks alone. As it stands, well worth the attention for two men we know very little about.

Michael Grenfell

COUNTRY GIRLS 1926-29

Various Artists
Matchbox (UK) MSE216

Kitchen Blues/Harbor Blues/You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down/Butcher Shop Blues/Dead Drunk Blues (Lillian Miller)/Doggone My Good Luck Soul/Black Hand Blues (Hattie Hudson)/No Easy Rider Blues/Gold Daddy Blues (Gertrude Perkins)/Twelve Pound Daddy/Little Rock Blues (Pearl Dickson)/He's Coming Soon/Heavenly Sunshine/Lord, You've Sure Been Good to Me/I Can Tell the World About This/Plenty Good Room in My Father's Kingdom/Lord, I Just Can't Keep From Crying Sometimes (Laura Henton)/Carbolic Acid Blues (Bobbie Cadillac)

Though a useful rather than an absorbing collection, *Country Girls* does include the very fine Hattie Hudson coupling, about which I'm inclined to agree with Paul

GIANTS OF THE COUNTRY BLUES VOL. 1 (1927-32)

Various Artists
Wolf (Austria) WSE116

Nappy Head Blues/Lonesome Atlanta Blues (Bobby Grant)/Mississippi Jail House Blues/Ham Hound Crave (Rube Lacy)/M. & O. Blues/Future Blues (Willie Brown)/Whoopie Blues (takes 1 & 2)/Down on My Bended Knee (takes 1 & 2)/The Gone Dead Train/Tell Me Baby (King Solomon Hill)/My Black Mama Parts 1 & 2/Preachin' the Blues Parts 1 & 2/Dry Spell Blues Parts 1 & 2 (Son House)

It is difficult to imagine any but novice blues collectors being unfamiliar with the magnificent records housed in this anthology, which are, without exception, major performances. As Paul Oliver observes, in the nostalgic opening paragraph of his notes, these are 'amongst the most beautiful blues I'd ever heard.' I endorse this opinion and find it difficult to write this review without producing a seeming catalogue of superlatives. What follows is, therefore, a series of comments designed to encourage the tyro blues enthusiast to hear this material in one form or another. I say this advisedly for all these sides have been previously reissued, often more than once, and most are still available with better sound.

Showcased here are some of the greatest prewar blues on record and most are definitive examples of the Mississippi Blues tradition. The album opens with an enigma called Bobby Grant, a biographical nonentity whose impeccable slide work and dramatic vocal delivery suggest the Delta, but whose lyrics indicate a possible Georgia origin. *Nappy Head Blues* is a marvellous song with a staggered, propulsive rhythm and rich vocal. On *Lonesome Atlanta* we hear the consummate use of the guitar as second voice, as Grant's light, precise slide work mimics and echoes his vocal phrases. From a one-record biographical blank, we proceed to a single-record artist whose life story is well researched (cf. David Evans's article in *BU* 40-44). Rube Lacy's *Mississippi Jail House Blues* has been a favourite of mine since it appeared on Origin OJL8. It is an assemblage of traditional prison lyrics forced into emotional coherence by the dramatic conviction of his singing, the sombre hummed passage and the essentially one-chord accompaniment. The erotic *Ham Hound (Bone) Crave* is defined by a persistent, pulsed guitar figure and distinguished by a splendid double-time break, rhythmically accented by Lacy's snapped bass-string work.

The sense of urgency which marks Lacy's performance is also crucial to the artistry of King Solomon Hill, whose identity has been the subject of much debate, but whose music is excitingly unique. His *Whoopie Blues* take 1 is sung in a normal voice to a superb guitar accompaniment, combining precise picking and delicate slide which is audible despite the poor sound on this reissue, but take 2 is a masterpiece, for here Hill's falsetto vocal creates an eerie atmosphere ideally suited to the bizarre lyrics: 'Undertaker been here and gone, I give him your height & size, I said, "You'll be making whoopie with the devil in hell tonight".' This falsetto also serves to generate a sense of taut high drama on the beautiful *The Gone Dead Train* – a great record in comparison with which *Tell Me Baby*, a version of a Memphis Minnie title, is almost commonplace. In his vital creativity Solomon Hill was an original who deserves to be heard by all blues lovers. The same must also be said of Willie Brown whose one recovered coupling is yet again reissued here. I have nothing new to say about this superb record, which has rightly been extensively discussed, and I can only recommend it as a classic example of the country blues at its most potent.

If one word can define the quality that distinguishes these records it is 'drama'. They all have a compelling intensity which transforms even the most prosaic material into arresting listening, and it is this quality above all that characterises Son House's masterpieces. His resonant, impassioned singing and insistent, almost hypnotic, slide playing are among the glories of the recorded blues and even after 50 years the emotional power of his records is undiminished.

The music on this album is truly the work of giants and all blues fans should be aware of it, but the sound quality is not good and I doubt that this is the best form in which to hear it, but hear it you must. **Henry Thomas**