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INTRODUCTION

Geologically speaking, the Yazoo River Basin region of northeastern Mississippi lies on both sides of the Yazoo and Tallahatchie Rivers. It is roughly triangular with its apex at Marked Tree, Arkansas. A straight line drawn from there to Durant, Mississippi, forms its eastern border. A straight line drawn from Durant to Vicksburg, Mississippi, forms its southern border. On the west it is bounded by the hills which parallel the Mississippi River on the Arkansas side, from Vicksburg to Marked Tree, Arkansas. The local name for the region is 'the Delta' or the 'Mississippi Delta', which should not be confused with the geologically accurate name of the Delta, applied to the terminus of the Mississippi River at the Gulf of Mexico. The Yazoo River Basin will be referred to, occasionally, as 'the Delta'.

Charley Patton is remembered throughout the Yazoo River Basin of Mississippi and eastern Arkansas as having been during his lifetime the most popular local guitar-playing songster and blues-singer of that region. A 'blues-singer' is simply one who sings blues. (Since an attempt to define blues forms an important part of this study, the term must remain undefined for the present.) There were many popular blues singers in the Delta, such as Eddie 'Son' House, who spent much of his early musical life with Patton and was greatly influenced by him; Ishmon Bracey (d. 1970), at first a singer of blues, then a preacher, who spent his entire life in Jackson, Mississippi, but knew Patton, and played with him on occasion when Patton came to Jackson; or Willie Brown, a friend of both House and Patton, with whom he sang and played, who died in about 1958, after spending most of his life in the Mississippi Delta. Patton is remembered as a 'songster' because, unlike his local competitors such as Son House, Ishmon Bracey, Willie Brown, Skip James and others, who knew few songs other than blues-songs and religious songs, Patton had a large repertoire of blues-ballads, ragtime pieces, and songs derived from either white popular or rural white traditions.

Blues-ballads are loose, shifting, and subjective narrative songs which celebrate and comment upon events rather than describe them in a straightforward, journalistic manner. Emotional reactions to events are indicated. Blues-ballads are lyrical and they make use of repetitions, clichés, commonplaces, contrasts, and refrains. They are usually collected from blacks rather than from whites, and many of them evolve through a long process of 'communal recreation' (using the term loosely) among black people. When collected from whites, black influence can usually be demonstrated. The term 'ragtime' will not be used to denote any songs which

are of the classical form, apparently invented by Scott Joplin. For a discussion of this form see the chapter 'The Rise of Ragtime' in Gilbert Chase's book, *America's Music*. In this study, 'ragtime' will refer to songs which are textually composed of nonsense stanzas or stanzas referring humorously to sexual matters. Musically, they are characterised by a quick tempo, frequent chord changes in the guitar accompaniment, and melodies which are either chromatically constructed, or are gapped versions of the Ionian mode, containing frequent major sevenths, rather than minor sevenths.

Charley Patton has been dead for more than 30 years, yet his name is readily recalled by many Mississippi blacks and some whites. His musical influence, in one way or another, lives on to this day in the recordings and performances of such recently popular blues-singers as Howlin' Wolf (whom Patton taught to play the guitar), Lightnin' Hopkins (who is known to sing stanzas from *Banty Rooster Blues*, which he probably learned by listening to one of Patton's recordings of that song), John Lee Hooker (who knew Patton and also sings some of his stanzas), and others.

Between 14 June 1929, and 1 February 1934, Patton made at least 52 issued commercial recordings. Of these, all but six sides (three records) have been made available for analysis. [But see p. 107]. His recorded repertoire represents a very good sample of what southern black songsters and blues-singers were performing between 1915 and 1934, the period during which Patton was an active entertainer. There are blues, spirituals and other religious songs, blues-ballads, folksongs, and even a few songs probably of Tin Pan Alley origin.

These recordings stand as a valuable social document. If the only source material for black music that we had was the printed collections of Work, Allen, Ware, Garrison, and others, we should have but a small fraction of the source material that is available to us. If, in addition, we had the testimony of people who remember Patton and singers like him, but ignored the possibilities inherent in analysing commercial recordings, we should be overlooking an extremely fruitful job of sampling, done inadvertently by commercial recording companies.

It is true that the folk-artist in a recording studio, isolated from the audience to which he is accustomed, is in an 'artificial' situation. The artist is told to make as few mistakes as possible, to watch for the red light on the wall since his performance can last no more than four minutes. He is told that he will be paid, but that he will be paid 'per accepted selections' only. For example, 'Mississippi' John Hurt, a songster from Carroll County, Mississippi, was told in a letter from T. G. Rockwell, Recording Director of the General Phonograph Company (OKeh), dated 8 November 1928: 'If it is possible for you to make arrangements to get away from Avalon for a week and come to New York for recording, we will pay you \$20.00 per accepted selection and all your expenses to New York and return for this work.' All this increases the 'artificiality' of the situation.

This critique is especially applicable to most of those 'race' recordings of female singers accompanied by groups of jazz instrumentalists. And the majority of early race recordings (between 1923 and 1926) were of this nature. The term 'race record' was used by most of the major record companies to denote those records of black artists designed primarily for black consumption. It was not used for recordings of black artists such as the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, designed for the white market, because this group performed in European musical style almost totally devoid of indigenous black stylistic characteristics. Race records were generally sold only in stores in segregated black areas. A survey of three race record catalogues by Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson in 1926 revealed that 'among the blues singers who have gained a more or less national recognition there is scarcely a man's name to be found.' Odum and Johnson, realising that these recordings were to a great extent contrived and were not a good sampling of what they termed 'folk blues', referred to them rather as recordings of 'formal blues'. This distinction between 'folk' and 'formal blues' was perfectly valid for the year 1926. Had they performed a similar survey in 1929, they would have found that their distinction between the two kinds of blues was no longer very useful.

Newman I. White, writing on blues in 1928, believed that Odum and Johnson and others — including W. C. Handy, John A. Lomax, Darius Milhaud, Carl Van Vechten and the writers of two articles in semi-scholarly periodicals — had 'pretty well exhausted the subject'. He further noted that 'the value of the blues as an expression of the folk-Negro's mind is somewhat impaired by the fact that the folk blues and the factory product are to-day almost inextricably mixed. Most blues sung by Negroes to-day have only a secondary folk origin; their primary source is the phonograph record.'

By 1929, everyone considered the subject of blues, and especially commercially issued blues, 'pretty well exhausted'. Let us examine for a moment 'the factory product' which White and Odum and Johnson have discussed. Much of what these scholars have said is true. When groups record, the members must decide in advance the exact metrical structure of the performance, or else musical chaos will ensue. As a result, most of the early blues recordings held rigidly to a predetermined structure, the 16- or 32-bar form which prevailed in the Tin Pan Alley songs of the day. The 12-bar stanza, known as the 'blues stanza' was also frequently used; sometimes a single song combined 12-bar and 16- or 32-bar forms. There were no metrical irregularities.

Furthermore, in group recordings it must be decided in advance which pitches each member is going to play or sing. The temporal duration of the pitches must to a great extent be predetermined, and it must be decided in advance at what place in the predetermined structure each member of the group is going to sing or play these pitches. Each member must know in

advance what every other member is going to do and when he is going to do it. The verses which are to be sung must also be predetermined. The group must further get the advance approval of the recording director. He may make suggestions to the group, which in turn influence the performance. This process is documented in Samuel B. Charters' book, *The Country Blues*.

The first 'blues' record (OKeh 4113: Mamie Smith's *That Thing Called Love and You Can't Keep a Good Man Down*, recorded 14 February 1920), was performed by a 'contralto' accompanied by the 'Rega Orchestra'. The songs were both *composed* by Perry Bradford, whom Charters refers to as 'the shrewdest and most determined of the colored blues writers.'

The performances were both rigidly predetermined. The same is true of most of Mamie Smith's recordings (she continued to record until 1931), of Bessie Smith's recordings (she recorded from 1923 until 1933), and of all the blues-singers who recorded commercially with groups. In many cases company men, or their friends, wrote the texts and the music of the songs to be recorded and taught them to the recording personnel.

It is recordings of this nature that Newman White and Odum and Johnson discuss. Certain types of black music, such as ring-shouts, field hollers, and street cries, were, of course, not represented in the catalogues which they consulted. The record companies perhaps felt that recordings of these, presumably older, forms of black music had no market value. Nevertheless, if these authors had gone to their local race record stores in 1929 and had listened to some of the recently issued race records, they would have discovered a new phenomenon: recordings of individual singers accompanying themselves with only guitars or banjo-guitars. They would have heard many traditional (as well as non-traditional) blues-verses that are not contained in their printed collections, nor in any others. They would have discovered recordings of traditional spirituals, blues-ballads, and folksongs of which they were totally unaware. And they would have been able to collect further traditional stanzas of songs which they knew already existed. Many of these songs and verses had never been issued on any previous record and thus could not have been learned by the recording artists from previous factory products.

The first recordings of individual black performers such as 'Papa' Charlie Jackson and Blind Blake were less predetermined than were group recordings. Jackson played a six-stringed banjo and recorded primarily ragtime songs for Paramount, OKeh, and the American Record Company. Between August 1924 and April 1935, approximately 40 of his records were issued. After 1926 he occasionally accompanied himself with a guitar and attempted to sing blues-songs, but recordings of these sold poorly. He is usually credited with being the first black singer to record with only a stringed instrument as accompaniment. Bessie Brown preceded him, however, by one month with her *Hoodoo Blues* (Columbia 14029-D,

recorded 3 July 1924). She was accompanied by Roy Smeck's guitar (not banjo as in Dixon and Godrich). Jackson was reported to be from New Orleans. His second record, Paramount 12336, *Salt Lake City Blues* and *Salty Dog Blues* sold enormously well.

Statements as to the relative number of record sales are made on the basis of the author's experience collecting race records in the Southern states by canvassing black homes. If, for example, I have found some 20 or 30 copies of 'Papa' Charlie Jackson's *Salt Lake City Blues* backed by *Salty Dog Blues* on Paramount 12236, and only one copy of *I Believe I'll Go Back Home* backed by *Trust in God And Do The Right*, by Blind Willie Davis on Paramount 12979 (which is actually the case), I assume that the former record sold quite well, the latter poorly.

Blind Blake (real name, Arthur Blake) recorded about 80 sides for Paramount between September 1926 and June 1932. His recordings are characterised by:

- (1) excellent, perhaps unequalled, ragtime guitar work. This style of guitar playing involves: (a) use of the thumb alternating between different bass strings which provides the rhythm — not necessarily syncopated; (b) the use of the second, sometimes also the third finger, to play the top three strings on which the tunes and/or 'riffs' are played; (c) the use of at least three chords, the major I, IV and V chord, frequently in the key of C in standard tuning. The older songsters such as John Hurt use this style. What Blake added to it was a great amount of syncopation, created by 'choking' the strings, i.e., damping the sound on the up-beat after sounding the string (or strings) with either hand. His guitar playing was so proficient that he accompanied jazz entertainers such as Johnny Dodds, Jimmy Bertrand and others.
- (2) texts similar to those of the earlier female blues-singers.

The same is true of Lonnie Johnson, whose guitar style was different in that he used a flat pick and was more classically oriented. Blake's (and Johnson's) texts usually describe either an unfortunate love affair or humorous sexual matters. Thus neither Blake nor Johnson can be considered a songster since their texts are never of folksongs or songs of popular origin. Yet Johnson's guitar style is undoubtedly an offshoot of the songster tradition.

These artists sang folksongs and blues in which there were occasional metrical irregularities. To some extent, the texts were probably still predetermined. But with the first recording of Blind Lemon Jefferson, the great blues-singer from Wortham, Texas (Paramount 12354: *Got The Blues* and *Long Lonesome Blues*, recorded in March 1926), a new phase of the recording industry began. This record sold enormously well and there began a rush to record other singers like him. Metrical irregularities are the rule rather than the exception on Blind Lemon's records; it is impossible to anticipate the number of measures (as well as the length of each measure)

in each verse. It is doubtful that the recording company offered Lemon any assistance in the composition of his texts. While it is impossible to tell to what extent the texts were predetermined by Lemon himself, it seems probable that the 'artificiality' of the commercial recording session did little to influence the text and the music beyond limiting their temporal duration. The vast majority of Lemon's verses do not exist in any printed collection.

It became commercially profitable to allow the individual performer as much freedom as possible at recording sessions, and the controlling factors which were necessary in group recordings were kept to a minimum. Depth studies and research can in many cases determine where such controlling factors were exercised. For example, it seems likely that on two issued sides (Paramount 12493, *Hot Dogs*, and Paramount 12578, *One Dime Blues*) by Lemon, company pressure was exerted to change his guitar style to approximate more closely to that of Blind Blake. This seems likely, for these two performances are the only recordings in that style among over 90 issued sides. All the others which the author has heard (about 80 per cent of the total) are in a different style, presumably Lemon's own. Son House, who recorded for Paramount in 1930, has said that the recording engineer exercised no controls and made no suggestions whatsoever to him, to Charley Patton, to Louise Johnson, or to Willie Brown, all of whom recorded while House was present. On one occasion, however, after House's session was over (during which time nothing he chose to record was rejected) the company man asked him to come back the next day with a song which sounded like one of Blind Lemon Jefferson's. (Jefferson was dead and the company was looking for a new best-seller.) House stayed up all night and composed his *Mississippi County Farm Blues* issued on Paramount 13096, which he thought sounded like one of Blind Lemon's songs. Apart from the fact that the tune is one of Lemon's (Paramount 12585: *See That My Grave's Kept Clean*), there is little similarity of sound. But the company man was pleased.

Skip James, who recorded for the same company in 1931, has said that the recording director, Arthur Laibley (the man who first recorded Blind Lemon and apparently recorded all of the other Paramount country-blues artists mentioned in this book, including Charley Patton), let him perform whatever he wanted and in whatever manner he chose, except in two cases. James attempted to record a song which he had learned from another Paramount record, the *Forty-Four Blues* by James Wiggins, Paramount 12860. Laibley suggested that James do a song about a gun with a different size calibre, and so James recorded his *22-20 Blues*. When Laibley requested that James make up a song about the depression, the singer recorded his *Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues*.

Rube Lacy, another Paramount artist, told the author that Laibley exercised the same non-directive policy with him. But Lacy also said that

Laibley told him to play 'blues'. Any new blues-song would do. Laibley probably told the other recording artists mentioned to do the same thing.

Before jumping to the conclusion that Laibley's injunction to play the blues resulted in a disproportionate amount of blues being recorded, we should try to understand what Laibley meant by this term and what his artists understood by it. Three of Son House's sides do not have the term 'blues' in their titles (Paramount 13042: *My Black Mama — Parts I and 2*; Paramount 13096: *Clarksdale Moan*). The texts of these sides do not tell a coherent story and are composed chiefly of verses describing the singer's feelings about male-female relationships. This type of song is, of course, frequently called 'blues'. *Dry Spell Blues*, in two parts, describes the reaction of House to a drought; *Mississippi County Farm Blues* describes his reaction to imprisonment. Only one side, which describes House's reaction to an unfortunate relationship with a woman, is entitled 'blues', on Paramount 13111, *What Any I To Do Blues*. Six of Skip James' issued sides describe a reaction to an unfortunate love affair, of which four have 'blues' in the title.

Perhaps the occurrence of 'blues' in the title of a song does not necessarily indicate that the singers or recording engineer thought that only songs which describe a personal reaction to an unfortunate love situation are 'blues'. Charley Patton recorded seven sides which contain at least one stanza, usually two or three, on the subject, and yet none of the titles of these seven sides contains the word 'blues': *It Won't Be Long*, *When Your Way Gets Dark*, *Heart Like Railroad Steel*, *Moon Going Down*, *Bird Nest Bound*, *Love My Stuff* and *Poor Me*. He recorded five sides which tell a story (or attempt to tell a story) about external events. *Tom Rushen Blues*, for example, contains no reference to women. *Dry Well Blues* describes what the citizens of Lula, Mississippi, did during a drought. *Running Wild Blues* seems to be a country hoedown or square-dance song; *A Spoonful Blues* is a ragtime song. Its text does mention women, but only in terms of amusing sexual allusions. *Elder Greene Blues* does not refer to an unfortunate love affair. The writer does not know what Laibley might have meant by 'blues', nor what Patton, House and James thought he meant. What Laibley in fact obtained was a large assortment of at least four or five different types of songs which had little in common. All types were occasionally entitled 'blues', except of course, religious songs.

Different 'takes' (i.e., more than one recording of the same song) were frequently made, but according to both James and House, only when a very bad mistake was made and they, the artists, were dissatisfied with the first performance. The recording engineer would play them back each take and ask them if *they* thought it satisfactory.

The Paramount Company (and also the Vocalion and Victor Companies) thus exercised a non-directive policy toward their individual artists. This was probably because the company engineers had little understanding of what such 'primitives' as Patton, House, and James were

doing. They could offer few meaningful or constructive suggestions, but hoped, on the basis of past sales of non-directed recordings, for more sales of records to those people (Yazoo Basin blacks, for example) who did understand what was being performed. Furthermore, it was becoming evident to the companies that it was impossible to predict what kind of a performance would sell. So the companies allowed their artists a great deal of freedom in the hope that the artists themselves would know what would sell.

Virtually anyone who could make any kind of musical sound could make at least one audition record for Paramount, Vocalion, or Victor. These companies had, and still retain, the reputation of recording, paying for, and issuing records of practically anyone who walked into their studios for an audition and of letting such people perform whatever they chose. Charters says, 'They (Victor) would make a test of anybody who wandered in, no matter what kind of music he played or how drunk he was. If they thought he could get through three minutes of anything musical, they made a test. If somebody happened to think about it he was paid ten dollars for his time.'

Charters writes that the Paramount Company also had 'a policy of . . . taking a chance on almost anything . . .' This policy 'preserved early musical styles that might have been lost . . . Almost every style of Southern singing was represented in their blues lists. . . .'

By 1931, the companies had been performing for three or four years the function of passively allowing hundreds of southern blacks to sit in their studios and record the songs which they had been singing for decades. The 'subject' of blues, as well as of other forms of Afro-American music, had scarcely been 'exhausted' by Odum and Johnson, nor by anyone else. The surface had hardly been scratched. But almost everyone, with the exception of John and Alan Lomax (see the bibliography for a list of their numerous publications), thought that no further investigation into black music was necessary. Scholars of folk music sat (and still sit) in their offices thinking that no more was to be found out about black music. Or, perhaps, they were simply not interested. In any case, scholars did little field collecting.

This condition prevailed until the late 1950s, when non-academic record collectors, such as the author, began to take an interest in the old 'factory products' for purely aesthetic purposes. In the interim, between 1928 (the publication date of Newman White's book) and the sixties, little attention has been directed toward race records as a possible source of folk music. As a result of this interest in such 'factory products' much field work was initiated, in most cases by record collectors, in a few by scholars such as D. K. Wilgus.

The neophyte folklorist is typically directed to printed collections if he wishes to learn about black music in the United States of America. The time

has come to point out two things: first, printed collections are not the only place in which one may find early examples of black song. In fact, what one usually finds is the text only, along with ludicrous but picturesque comments about the southern 'darker'. Secondly, the type of material which was *purchased* during non-directive recording sessions by commercial companies may not have been entirely different from the kind of material which was *collected* (or could have been collected) by folklorists during the 1920s and printed in collections. The motivations for collecting and purchasing were, of course, different. But let us compare the two types of recording situations.

First of all, it is impossible without the assistance of hidden microphones, or some such equipment, to observe and record folklore in a completely 'natural' setting. The presence of the recording engineer automatically renders the situation contrived. But the presence of the folklorist also makes the situation 'unnatural'. Any criticism directed at the 'artificiality' of such a passive recording situation as the Paramount studios offered might also be directed at recordings (on paper or record) made by folklorists. The great job of collecting done by Cecil Sharp was performed in a situation which was no less contrived than were the recordings made by companies at non-directive sessions. The two types of recording (by folklorist and passive studio) are very much the same. The only significant difference is that recordings made by passive companies had to be limited in length. But even so, when a performer could not get all of his song on one side of a record he was frequently given the option of extending his performance into a 'Part 2', or even '3' or '4', like *Jim Jackson's Kansas City Blues* in four parts on Vocalion 11144 and 1155. Also, of course, the performers were paid by the record companies; in most cases they were not paid by field-collectors.

There seems to be no reason for regarding passive sessions of individual artists recorded by companies as of any less value than sessions in the field recorded by folklorists. Furthermore, many folklorists, such as Odum and Johnson, recorded only the texts (or with very little of the music). Those, such as Sharp, who wrote down the music they heard were subject to error. If Cecil Sharp made mistakes, we shall never be able to know that he did so. But we can listen to commercial recordings. The text *and music* are there, and if we make transcriptions of the words or texts, these transcriptions can always be checked by playing the record. It is a sad commentary on American scholars of folkmusic that between 1927 and 1962 the commercial recording industry did an infinitely better job of collecting, preserving, and making available to the public native American folksongs – especially black folksongs.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Practically all of the information presented here has been supplied by Mr Gayle Dean Wardlow of Meridian, Mississippi, Mr David Evans of Los Angeles, and Mr Bernard Klatzko of New York. However, a preliminary statement is necessary regarding the status of biographical research dealing with Patton.

In the first place, no one sought to unearth any of the facts of Patton's life until 1958, when the author first visited Clarksdale and Greenwood, Mississippi, although Patton had died 24 years earlier. No one recalled anything about Patton except that he was a great musician and songster, indeed the most popular blues-singer living in the Yazoo Basin during the last 20 years of his life. People remembered that he drank a lot and 'lived a rough life' (i.e. he was not very religious), and that his last record was *There Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down*, which he recorded a few days before he was stabbed to death or poisoned by a jealous woman. The first two of these 'facts' which many Delta Negroes 'remember' appear to be true. The third is easily disproved and the fourth is only half true.

In the intervening 24 years between the time of his death and 1958, practically everything about Patton had been forgotten by those who knew him best. Even his last 'wife', Bertha Lee Pate (now Bertha Lee Joiner) today seems to remember little more than that he played the guitar.

There exists a great deal of confusion about the circumstances of Patton's birth, not only among those who knew him, but among those who claim to be related to him. The procedure used in order to determine the facts is for the most part the following.

The testimony of people who volunteer information on other matters, with which the author is already well acquainted (who made the best selling record of *Shake 'Em On Down*; where Skip James learned his songs; what James's real name was; who Henry Stuckey was, etc.), informants who readily admit that they know nothing about a certain subject, or that they have forgotten; such testimony is given more credence than that of informants who attempt to gloss over their lack of knowledge. Consequently, much reliance is placed upon Sam Chatmon, since he has an excellent memory and seems to be entirely honest. Son House, while honest, does not possess a uniformly accurate memory, but readily admits when he is confused. Finally, I have derived information from numerous people who were acquainted with Patton at different stages during his life — people who were reliable on other matters — but people too numerous to mention.

Sam Chatmon, who provided much of the information on Charley Patton's early life and career, was a member of a large family of brothers,

among them Bo, Lonnie, Harry, Sam and an adopted brother Walter Jacobs, otherwise called Walter Vincent. The Chatman family was most prodigious in its recording career. Bo Chatmon, under the name 'Bo Carter', recorded more than a hundred sides for various companies. He was also a member of the Mississippi Sheiks, a group usually consisting of a vocalist with guitar and violin or guitar and piano accompaniment. The Sheiks made nearly as many records as Bo Chatmon did on his own, and most of them were very good sellers. They also recorded as the Chatman Brothers, the Mississippi Blacksnakes and the Mississippi Mud Steppers, and at one session accompanied Texas Alexander, who, in terms of record sales, was one of the top ten blues vocalists during the period before World War II. (Not much is known of him except that Sam 'Lightnin' Hopkins claims him as a 'cousin' on occasion.) Lonnie and Sam Chatmon were the 'Chatman Brothers' on Bluebird. Dixon and Godrich's report of this session is misleading; where there are two guitars, rather than violin and guitar, the second guitarist is Eugene Powell. Bo Chatmon acted as agent for Powell, who is still living in Greenville, Mississippi, and was once known as 'Sonny Boy Nelson'. It was under this pseudonym that his own Bluebird records were issued, though, curiously enough, Powell was until recently unaware of the fact.

Bo Carter (left), with Will Shade





Sam Chatmon

Sam Chatmon — who played guitar with the Sheiks — in retrospect regards Patton as a fairly good musician, when he was not clowning around, but feels that the Sheiks and Charlie McCoy were much more proficient, versatile and talented. The Chatman Brothers' recordings are characterised by group sessions, complex chords, more use of the major 4 and major 5 chords in the same song — in general, a more sophisticated sound than that of Patton and his musical generation.

The Sheiks, like Patton, played at parties for white people, and this for a while served as their main source of income. Lonnie both read and wrote music, having learned from another black musician, who in turn had learned from an Italian violin-maker. While Bo played the violin a little, Lonnie always played it at parties and for recording sessions, since he was very much more proficient on the instrument than was Bo.

Chatmon's main criticism of Patton and the older generation was that they only knew how to play in the key of E and in 'Spanish' (open G). Many people have long suspected that the open G guitar tuning was derived from a very common open G banjo tuning. This may be the case ultimately, but Sam Chatmon never saw a banjo until he was in his thirties.

According to Sam 'there was an older style around than what me and Lonnie and Bo played. Now my father he played the fiddle — old songs like *Turkey in the Straw* and such. My older brothers and half-brothers, including Charley played mostly in E and 'Spanish' and that was all! Even a couple of my older sisters played the same way. Now I can't exactly do it, but I'll show you how Charley used to come around and twirl the guitar — you see, like this, and then play and make it come out right [sings and plays first verse of *Pony Blues*]. Then he had a way of tapping on the guitar too, the same time he played [demonstrates this] . . . and a lot of others too, like behind his neck [another demonstration].'

Charley Patton was the son of Henderson Chatmon (father of the Chatmons and a former slave) and Anney Patton (wife of Bill Patton) and was born near Edwards, probably in Bolton, Mississippi, in the late 1880s. Since Henderson Chatmon was born of a mixed union, and had very little black blood, Charley was evidently of primarily white and Indian descent. Charley had numerous brothers and half brothers by both Henderson and Anney Patton. According to Sam, morals were much relaxed in those days. His father had many 'outside women' and nobody seemed to mind. Charley spent about half his early life with the Chatmons; this explains some of the confusion surrounding these years.

Other people who knew Patton in and around his adolescent home on Dockery's Plantation give a different picture of Patton's family. His 'father', presumably Bill Patton, was apparently a part-time preacher. Patton then, had a second set of other, different relatives and siblings. His siblings by Henderson Chatmon were William and James (both deceased) and nine sisters, plus Sam Lonnie and Bo Chatmon, the younger Chatmon

generation. Two of his sisters, Kattie and Viola are still alive. Unfortunately they are unreliable informants.

Charley struck out from the Bolton area in his late teens or early twenties and played in many roadhouses along Highway 80. It was during this period that he made his home, when he *was* home, with the Pattons. But it should be remembered that his very distinctive singing and playing style came from growing up with the elder Chatmon brothers, and, presumably, their friends. Where these styles came from, if anywhere other than around the Chatmon household, cannot be ascertained. As Sam Chatmon said, 'Charley was a grown man when I was just a child and he was already doing all those things.'

Charley married young. His first common-law wife was named Gertrude. In 1908 at about the age of 21, he married his second wife, Millie Toy, from Boyle, Mississippi.

In 1912 a veritable congregation of guitar players and singers was to be found in and about a small town, Drew, Mississippi. The town is situated near two large plantations which were owned at the time by Will Dockery and Jim Yeagers. Patton was living at Dockery's at this time. Among the resident musicians whose presence in the area in 1912 has been confirmed (in each case by interview, then by checking with one or more of the others who were supposed to be there) were Patton, Willie Brown and his wife — who also played, Tommy Johnson, his brother LeDell, LeDell's wife Marry Bell Johnson, Roebuck Staples of the famous gospel singing family 'The Staple Singers', 'Howlin' Wolf' (real name Chester Burnett, who admits to having taken lessons from Patton, and still imitates his vocal style, unsuccessfully), Dick Bankston, 'Cap' Holmes and a few others who evidently travelled through the area from time to time but whose presence cannot be confirmed due to contradictory information.

According to Sam Chatmon, Patton already played and sang 'just like' the older brothers and sisters of the Chatmon family before he came anywhere near Drew. And since Patton seems to have left Drew still singing and playing in much the same way as before, it may be supposed that he was a major, if not *the* major influence on the Drew scene. Undoubtedly he left with more than he had come with — such atypical Patton songs as *Frankie And Albert* and *Some These Days I'll Be Gone*, for instance — but it seems probable that Tommy Johnson, Willie Brown and others learned much more from Patton than he did from them; this has been admitted by Howlin' Wolf and Roebuck Staples. Some confusion exists as to who learned what from whom, in the case of Tommy Johnson, since Patton's first home was very near Crystal Springs, where Johnson was born. For example, both men recorded versions of *Pony Blues*, for the same company, less than a year apart. Both played in open G, 'Spanish tuning'; and not only did they both use the same tune contour — which might have been expected — but Johnson in his treatment (Paramount 13000, *Black Mare*



Viola Cannon, Patton's sister, with her daughter Bessie Turner

Blues), used virtually the same tune phrases as Patton employed on *Pony Blues*. Both men used to clown; Patton danced round his guitar, Johnson round and on his Gibson. On the other hand, Patton never recorded anything in the standard tuning, key of D; and this was a tuning much favoured by Tommy Johnson, as well as by other musicians who played round Jackson a good deal, such as Tommy McClennan, the *Bullfrog Blues Man*. There are certain songs and verse complexes which are associated



Dockery's

with the key of D, such as those found in the many variants of *Big Road Blues* — which Sam Chatmon recorded with the Sheiks, under the title of *Stop And Listen Blues*.

The significance of all these musicians living in the same area at the same time lies in three facts. First, there was a great deal of communal creation. Secondly, after these people left Drew, the songs, lyrics, styles and so forth, which they had learned and created there, began to appear in the north (as far as Chicago and Detroit, up to the present time) and the rest of the south. They may still be recovered by any field worker virtually anywhere in the United States where there are performing, non-professional black musicians — even in the western states. (This claim takes no account of instances where the singer has learned the song from a phonograph record, even though some folklorists consider records as merely an extension of the 'normal' person-to-person diffusion process.) Thirdly, these songs, styles and lyrics became known as 'blues' even

though performances, and recordings of performances, by city groups had previously been and continued to be called 'blues'. The 'city blues' were generally performed by groups, with quite 'regular' metric structure and textual coherence. These evidently newer 'country blues' were more individual (and perhaps more personal), irregular and textually incoherent or ambivalent (see last chapter).

Certain differences in performance can be described between those singers who went north and those who remained south, but the similarities are much greater. If field recordings and commercially issued phonograph records from the north contain more vocal growling and are delivered more harshly than those from the south, if very few examples from the north exhibit guitar-playing in the key of D while those from the south do, then source-analysis usually indicates that in the north many singers learned their songs and styles, directly or indirectly, from, say, Patton, while those in the south learned theirs from Tommy Johnson.

Musicians from the north were also, to a great extent, influenced by the Son House, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters group; those in the south by singers from Bentonia, Mississippi — Skip James and his friends — another instance of communal creation.

In many cases, after 1940, and even before that, source analysis indicates that singers learned their songs directly from phonograph records by Patton, Johnson or others. This, I think, represents a gradual breakdown in oral tradition. To attempt to represent the process of learning how to play a song directly from a phonograph record as merely an extension of oral tradition is ludicrous. To attempt to put forth definitive distinctions between a northern and a southern style of singing with the meagre information we have (meagre in comparison with what we need to do so, and could have, had more research been done at least before 1940), information gained primarily from phonograph records issued after 1940, would at this late date be ill-advised.

A few years after Patton's arrival, a black soldier returned from the war in Europe and shot a white man in, or near, Drew. Other musicians had already moved, but this event really began the Drew diaspora. Most of the blacks in the area were forced to move.

Brown, Staples and his family, and Howlin' Wolf left and went north, carrying their music with them. Wolf still sings many Patton songs and Roebuck Staples plays like Patton and Brown. The Johnsons moved to the Jackson area; Tommy recorded for both Victor and Paramount a few years later, in 1928 and 1930 respectively, and stayed in Crystal Springs until his death in the fifties.

Patton and Johnson appear, in retrospect, to have been more imitated than innovative; more cooperative than creative. Yet few people realise that Patton was part of a large exchange process which went on for several years



Son House

before his emergence as a prodigious recording star and purveyor of local songs. While Tommy Johnson remained in, or for the most part near Jackson, Patton travelled around a great deal, but chiefly within the confines of the 'Delta'.

Patton later stayed at Dockery's until 1924, at which time he left and in Merigold met Minnie Franklin, whom he 'married'. This woman is still alive. Her full name is Minnie Franklin Washington, and she lives in Bovina, Mississippi. She reports that Patton was singing *Pony Blues* when she met him in 1924, but the song was probably much older. In Merigold, Patton became acquainted with two sheriffs, Mr Day and Tom Rushen, and a Mr Halloway who made whisky. Patton composed a song about these people called *Tom Rushen Blues* which he later recorded for Paramount, and *High Sheriff Blues* which he recorded in New York at his last session in

1934. Patton left Merigold in about 1929 (alone) and met Mr Henry C. Spiers of Jackson, Mississippi. Spiers owned a music store in Jackson, and had acted for years as a talent scout for several large record companies. He sent Patton to the Gennett studios in Richmond, Indiana, where on 14 June Patton had his first session for the Paramount Company. (Paramount frequently used the Gennett studios.) Patton spent his remaining years performing in the Yazoo Delta in various towns, usually near the Mississippi River, in Mississippi and Arkansas. He rarely left this area to perform.

Patton probably met Bertha Lee Pate (whom he 'married') in Lula, Mississippi, and Henry Sims (a fiddle player from Farrell) in 1929, shortly after his first recording session. He is reported by Son House to have lived and performed at Lula and at most of the local towns, especially on the plantation of Mr Joe Kirby, where he performed with Son House and Willie Brown. He also lived near there on the plantation of a Mr Geffery. He recorded again for Paramount at the company's own studios in Grafton, Wisconsin, in November and December of 1929, taking Henry Sims with him.

He began acting as subsidiary talent scout for Spiers shortly after his first two records were issued. It was through Patton that Willie Brown and Son House were recorded. In May 1930 he went to Grafton with House, Willie Brown, Louise Johnson (who sang blues and played the piano) and Wheeler Ford of the famous 'Delta Big Four' gospel quartet. Patton's final Paramount session took place on 28 May. According to Son House, Paramount used two microphones, one for voice and one for instrument. Skip James said the same thing except that when he played the piano, the recording engineer also put a microphone on his feet. The artists were well 'lickered up' before recordings were made.

Shortly after this, Patton and Bertha Lee lived for a while in Cleveland, Mississippi. It was here that Bertha Lee is reported to have had a fight with Patton and to have cut his throat with a butcher's knife. She, of course, will not discuss the matter, but the story is well known in Cleveland. That Patton survived, but with a scar on his throat, and, nevertheless, stayed with Bertha Lee is well established.

In 1933, Patton and Bertha Lee moved to Holly Ridge, where they performed locally together. Patton was suffering greatly at this time, and prior to it, from a heart ailment of which he was soon to die. He was chronically out of breath and it would take him two or three days to recuperate from a night's singing.

In early January of 1934 an 'A&R man', Mr W. R. Calaway of the American Record Company (ARC) went to Jackson in search of Patton. A&R stands for 'Artists and Repertoire'. A&R men work for record companies and music publishers; they select artists for certain songs which they want to get recorded and help supervise the recording sessions.

W. R. Calaway performed both functions with such white, 'country' entertainers as Roy Acuff, Bill and Cliff Carlisle, and others. With Patton and Bertha Lee, he probably performed only the latter function. Calaway later tried to get Willie Brown and Son House to record for him, both of whom refused for different reasons. He wanted to take Patton to New York to record for his company. He contacted Spiers and asked him for Patton's address, but Spiers refused to give it to him, because, he claims, Calaway had swindled him in a previous business deal. (Spiers recalls this vividly. Unfortunately, Calaway could not be consulted, since he died in Orlando, Florida in about 1955.) Spiers notwithstanding, Calaway found Patton and Bertha Lee in Belzoni, Mississippi. During the evening of the day Calaway arrived, Patton, Lee, and others were jailed because of a commotion that had occurred in the roadhouse in which they were playing. Mr Purvis, the 'High Sheriff' of Humphreys County, and Mr Webb, his deputy, were the local law-enforcement officers. Calaway later bailed out Patton and Bertha Lee and the three left together for New York. Patton sings about both law-enforcement officers on *High Sheriff Blues*. Patton's (and Bertha Lee's) last recording session took place on 30 and 31 January, and 1 February 1934. At this session Patton sang as the last verse of his *34 Blues*:

It may bring sorrow, Lord, and it may bring tears, (*twice*)
Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, let me see your brand new year.

He never did. The ailment which had bothered him for years was to put an end to his life. Shortly after he returned to Holly Ridge from his ARC session, he became ill. He was taken to a hospital in Indianola, Mississippi, on 17 April 1934, released 20 April, and died 28 April. Mississippi State Board of Health Certificate of Death Number 6643 attributes the cause of Patton's death to 'Mitral Valve heart hose' (heart failure).

When fully grown, Patton was quite short, about 5 ft 6 inches tall, and of lean build. He had light skin and Caucasian features. He is reported to have played practically everywhere in the Yazoo Basin and to have travelled with medicine shows. During many performances, as stated, Patton did tricks with his guitar, such as dancing around it, banging on it while he played, and playing it behind his head. He taught Howlin' Wolf, Willie Brown, and Son House a great deal on the guitar.

As distinct from such travelling performers as Blind Lemon, Blind Blake, Lonnie Johnson, and others, Patton spent almost his entire life in or near his native Mississippi Delta. He left it rarely to perform, and only a few times to make records. His recorded repertoire reflects his limited picture of the world. When he does mention place names, such places are usually located in the Yazoo Basin. Here is a list of place names Patton mentions, with the corresponding master numbers:

- 15220 Memphis, Minglewood (in Memphis).
 15221 Pea Vine (name for either any branch line of a railroad or in this case the branch line of the Southern Railroad, which ran from Clarksdale through Shelby, Merigold and other small towns, to Greenville).
 15223 Parchman (the Mississippi county farm for Negroes).
 L-44 Marion, Arkansas and the Green River. (The Green River is not on any map but is a local name for a small river in the Delta near Dubs.) The Southern Railroad and the 'Yellow Dog' Railroad, a local name for the Yazoo Delta Railroad.
 15214 Natchez, Jackson.
 L-432 Clarksdale, Sunflower; Helena, Arkansas.
 15223 Hot Springs, Arkansas.
 L-37 Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana (occur as part of a refrain, probably traditional).
 L-38 New Orleans (occurs in a verse of a traditional blues-ballad).
 L-41 Louisiana.
 L-59 Sumner, Greenville, Leland, Rosedale, Vicksburg, Stovall, Tallahatchie River, Jackson; Blytheville, Arkansas.
 L-63 Gulf of Mexico; Vicksburg; Louisiana; Shelby, Illinois (not on any map).
 L-77 Chicago.
 L-429 Lula.
 14725 Belzoni.
 14727 Vicksburg, Lula, Natchez, Greenville.
 14747 Mississippi, Dago Hill (a local name for the region north of Mound Bayou, Mississippi: a great many Italians live there).

Only the following people are mentioned:

- 15222 Tom Rushen, Hollaway, Mr Day.
 14725 Mr Purvis, Mr Webb.
 14739 Hollaway, Will Dockery.
 14757 Bertha Lee.

No person of more than local prominence is ever mentioned and no one from outside the state of Mississippi is mentioned. When Patton sings of external events, he usually refers to local ones: the 1927 flood of the Mississippi River (Paramount 12909, *High Water Everywhere — Parts 1 and 2*), the drought of the following two years and how it was felt in Lula (Paramount 13070, *Dry Well Blues*), the demise of the Clarksdale Mill (Paramount 13014, *Moon Going Down*). The one exception is his description of the 'Railroad strike in Chicago' (Paramount 12953, *Mean Black Moan*).

Patton was dependent upon, and a product of, the prevailing socioeconomic conditions of the southern cotton production economy, a semi-feudal society. According to Son House, Sam Chatmon and others, he

detested and avoided manual labour and spent most of his adult years as a semi-professional, paid (or kept) entertainer. There was room in this economy for a few full-time professional entertainers, and although the entertainer did not earn a sumptuous living, he made a decent one relative to the standards of the time and place. If he was supported by numerous roadhouses and corn-liquor salesmen, these roadhouses and bootleggers in turn were dependent upon the (sometimes) wealthy plantation owners. Most Delta blacks worked for the plantation owners and were paid but meagre monetary wages. There was a great deal of restriction of personal freedom, and many blacks led lives similar to those of medieval serfs. Everything was white-owned and the law of the land was white law.

On the other hand, blacks who worked on Delta plantations were always provided with housing (called 'quarters') and frequently with food. When the depression came and there was no work, the black workers were fed by the plantation owners, protected by the benevolent southern land-owner tradition. There were few jobs in the Delta for blacks that did not deal with cotton, and they could not rise to a very prominent position even among their own people. A black man could become a preacher, but the best he could do in secular life was become an overseer (the leader of a cotton crew) or a musician.

If we search Patton's lyrics for words expressive of profound sentiments directly caused by this particular cotton-economy, or for words expressing

Cotton pickers in the Mississippi Delta



a desire to transcend this way of life, if we search for verses of great cultural significance depicting any historical trend or movement, or aspirations to 'improve the lot of a people', we search in vain. Such a search would not be fruitful with any blues-singers. Patton could, of course, only sing about his own limited experience. He had a very narrow view of the world. And there was perhaps no intellectual climate available to Patton for the development of significant thoughts or comments about his and his people's status.

Patton was an *entertainer*, not a social prophet in any sense. He had no profound message and was probably not very observant of the troubles of his own people. He was not a 'noble savage'. Least of all did he try to express the 'aspirations of a folk'. His lyrics are totally devoid of any protesting sentiments attacking the social or racial *status quo*. In fact, according to Son House, Patton had very good relations with white people, many of whom helped to support him in return for his services. They liked not only his folksongs but also his blues. Both Patton and House were frequently received into white homes, slept in them, and ate in them. The racial segregation of Patton's day was not as rigorous as it is now, and it was not as insidious.

Beyond mentioning place names, Patton's lyrics have nothing distinctively regional about them that could have made them products of only a particular time and place. They could have been produced by any songster from any agricultural-economy region of the South. Most of his lyrics, or portions of them, are probably floating verses derived from field-hollers and other sources. As such they could have been performed or recombined, as they were, by anyone familiar with the tradition. It is impossible to determine exactly where and when such verses were composed, as it is impossible to reconstruct an authoritative history of black music in general. No one was interested enough at the time to survey what was happening.

As has been implied, the function which Charley Patton performed in his society was, for the most part, that of an entertainer. His function as a musician was subordinate. Patton used his musical abilities, as well as his ability to dance and to do tricks with the guitar, in order to *please an audience*.

We cannot know, of course, what Patton did when he was alone. Perhaps, while entertaining himself (assuming that he did so), he concentrated more on his musicianship. But as star performer of a medicine show, as the source of music for a dance, as roadhouse entertainer, as paid background music for back-country gatherings whenever local corn-liquor salesmen set up shop, Patton's job was to help everyone to enjoy himself.

Son House and Ishmon Bracey both commented on Patton's clowning. House did not approve of it and is to this day critical of Patton. As a result, when some of Patton's recordings were played for House in 1965, he was



Son House in London, 1967

amazed at Patton's technical proficiency. 'I never knew he could play that good,' he said. He then explained that while Patton was apparently a great musician, the purely musical aspect of his public performances suffered as a result of his 'clowning around,' which House insists Patton preferred to do.

The apparent selectivity of House's memory seems strange in view of the fact that House was present while Patton made some of the same records which were played for him 35 years later. But House had simply forgotten that Patton was a competent musician because he saw him so frequently as an entertainer and so rarely as a serious musician. Vocal and instrumental proficiency were necessary for an entertainer, but they were not enough. Patton had the other talents as well. What we hear, then, on Patton's records is apparently not the way Patton sounded in public. On records we hear him consciously trying to be a good musician. But we should not make too much of the probable differences of performance in the two situations. Patton could not have suddenly summoned up so much technical proficiency at the recording sessions if he did not already possess it. Thus, there were probably other times when Patton performed primarily as a serious musician. Unfortunately, no one remembers such times. Perhaps he performed seriously only when he was alone. If Patton's recordings are of Patton at his musical best and do not sound exactly as he sounded at public performances, there is no reason to suppose that *what* he played (music and text) varied in the two situations. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that Patton's recordings constitute a valuable and accurate sample of what Patton was playing and singing during the last years of his life and probably for many of his earlier years. It should be remembered, for example, that he was performing some version of his *Pony Blues* as early as 1924, five years before his first recording session.