THE JAZZ REVIEW

JAZZ

Volume 3 / Number 5 / June 1960 / Fifty Cents

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VOLUME 3 NUMBER 5 JUNE 1960

RECORD REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

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NEW CONTRIBUTORS

John William Hardy is a zoologist now engaged in research on the social behavior of parrots at the University of California at Los Angeles.

I. L. Jacobs has been listening to jazz since the thirties and has long conducted a jazz radio show in San Diego.

Robert Farris Thompson is a student of Afro-Latin music and dance who has written on his specialty for **Dance** Magazine.

THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL

Mack McCormack

The overnight train to San Antonio used to roll out of the Houston depot a few minutes past eleven every night. The Southern Pacific called it **"The Alamo Special."** Twenty-five miles beyond the city, where it crossed the Brazos River bottoms, the black men staring out of the grilled dormitory windows of Central Unit #2 called it **"The Midnight Special."** To them the train was a howl and a stabbing cone of light, a rush of yellow squares framing glimpses of freedom. In a moment it was gone, the thundering vibration fading, the song and the convicts to sing it left behind.

"Oh, let the Midnight Special shine its light on me;
Let the Midnight Special shine its ever-lovin' light on me."

Roaring across the dark prairie, the train seemed the embodiment of "freedom's chariot". It was escape from the prison described in one blues: "That Fort Bend County bottom is a burning hell". Escape in the sense of travel; escape by suicide beneath the grinding wheels. Many trains invade the prison, the tracks cut through the long-stretching, exact rows of corn, cotton, and cane worked by the prisoners. But this was a passenger train, a slice of an utterly different world. And it came just on the edge of midnight, when a prisoner gets "to studying 'bout my great long time."

James Baker, Moses Platt, and Huddie Ledbetter have lain in chains at Central Unit #2, watching this train. These three—better known by their prison names as Ironhead, Clear Rock, and Leadbelly—were among the thousands who have eased themselves by singing the stark reflections.

"If you ever go to Houston,
You better walk right,
You better not stagger,
And you better not fight."

A notable failure to heed this advice occurred in 1923, when Jack Smith held up a bank messenger in broad daylight. Quickly captured and sentenced to twenty-five years at hard labor, Smith sat in the county jail at Houston, waiting to "pull chain." It was a bad time to be going to the penitentiary. Previously, he could have bought a pardon, an easy matter during Big Jim Ferguson's administration as Texas governor. But Ferguson had been impeached for this and other shady activities. Pat Neff, the new governor, had campaigned with a promise to end the traditional practice of selling pardons. To hold the voters' confidence he was refusing to grant any pardons. (During his four years as governor, he released only five men. One of these pardons is the act by which history will remember Pat Neff.)

Jack Smith sat in jail, brooding about the notorious transfer man, Uncle Bud Russell, who was to arrive shortly.

Apparently contemplating a variety of escape methods, Jack Smith got a friend to smuggle caustic acid, saw blades, and a pistol into his cell. Only the gun proved necessary. It was then common practice for lawyers to see their clients in the courthouse lobby; during such a visit, Smith pulled his gun, clubbed a deputy, and dashed outside to jump on the running board of a passing auto.

At the time, the sheriff's residence was in its Old-West location, adjoining the jail. Sheriff T. A. Binford was at home for his little girl's birthday party, when a groggy deputy ran over to tell him of the escape. Binford commandeered a second auto and a running gun battle ensued through the business district. Hundreds of pedestrians flattened themselves on the sidewalks as the Sheriff got his man.

Now retired to a farm on Houston's outskirts, Binford recalled the incident recently: "I stayed with Jack all that next night. Just the two of us in a dark cell. I didn't beat him like they say. Just talked until finally he told me who it was had slipped him that gun and stuff. I got that fellow and he went to the 'walls' too. Jack told me he prayed to get out, said he figured if he prayed hard enough it could be done even though no one had ever broken my jail. 'But, Sheriff,' he told me, 'I just didn't pray not to get caught.' "

A few days later, with Jack Smith again sitting in his cell, the corridors began to echo with a song about the escape. Binford vaguely recalled the lines;

"If you ever go to Houston,
Better not break that County Jail,

.....

Sheriff Binford went a-running,
Chased ol' Jack Smith down.
You can bet your bottom dollar,
He's Sugarland bound." [1]

until Ed Badeaux, vacationing in his hometown, made a point of visiting the Sheriff to sing him the song as it is familiarly known (and included in Ed's Folkways album **"American Guitar").** The ex-sheriff snorted with surprise at hearing this odd memorial to himself. "They was always singing something you know—but I never thought anybody'd be interested."

Commenting on the Sandburg variant where the name is given as "T. Bentley", he said: "That's closer in a way. Most people just called me T." A crusty individual

who characterizes himself as a "hound dog man", Binford acquired his gun lore as a youth in the frontier west. He began police work as a mounted officer and came to public notice in the tragic riot of Negro soldiers in 1917. Northern recruits, unused to the southern caste system, staged a revolt against their officers and charged toward Houston's business district screaming their protests. Binford, among the first to meet the mob, was promptly wounded and woke next morning to find himself hero of the incident. Thirty-seven of the Negroes were hanged; Binford was made sheriff in the next election.

"Well, yonder comes Bud Russell,
How in the world do you know?
Tell him by his big hat,
And his forty-fo'."

Uncle Bud Russell is an oft-mentioned figure in songs originating in Texas. Like another prison transfer man who gave rise to **Joe Turner Blues,** the folk-image of Bud Russell is one of an evil spirit wandering the land, kidnapping the men into slavery.

Often the sole guard to handle the transfer of large groups of prisoners from the far-flung Texas counties to the Huntsville "walls", and thence to the prison farms which spread along the Brazos and Trinity river bottoms, Bud Russell has been held in awe by all who have dealt with him. Both convicts and prison officials seem to have feared him. Two generations of Texans have been brought up on the warning: "Don't do it unless you want to see Uncle Bud come for you."

"He walked into the jailhouse,
With a gang a' chains in his hand.
I heard him tell the trustee,
'I'm the transfer man'."

Binford described the 6-foot, 200 pound Bud Russell as "most successful" among the transfer men. The present Harris County jailer, C. K. McAlpine, remembers him as a "very strong man with a very big knife." On one occasion McAlpine turned over a total of 64 prisoners to the transfer man. As was the custom in those days, Russell chained the prisoners in one long line, then marched them across downtown Houston, boarding the train to Huntsville with only himself to guard the entire group.

In his song for Governor Pat Neff, Leadbelly chants between the verses, giving an account of his own experience: "Bud Russell, which traveled all over the state and carried de men down de state penitentiary, had me goin on down. Had chains all around my neck, and I couldn't do nothin but wave my hands."

Lightnin' Hopkins recently recorded a blues—adapting lines from **Ain't No More Cane On The Brazos**—which commemorates Russell's days as a prison guard: "They say you ought to been on the Brazos nineteen and ten, Bud Russell drove pretty women just like he done ugly men." The old song "Uncle Bud" which describes a bullish, hell-with-women kind of man, has in Texas become associated with the specific menace of Bud Russell.

"Uncle Bud's got this, Uncle Bud's got that,
Uncle Bud's got an arm like a baseball bat.
Uncle Bud's the damnest you ever seen,
Uncle Bud's got plenty of gasoline."

The last line has reference to the out-size gasoline tanks with which the transfer wagon, used in recent years, was supplied. These tanks enabled Russell to drive his charges to prison non-stop from any point in Texas.

Having died a few years after his retirement to his home in Hill County, Uncle Bud Russell is vividly remembered in folk songs.

"T. K. Edwin went to Austin,
With a paper in his hands,
To get the intermediate sentence
Passed on de convict man.

He hand the paper to the gov'nor,
And there it stood.
I know she gonna sign it,
Cause she said she would."

T. K. "Kirk" Irwin served as chief of city detectives at Houston for a number of years. Again a name is somewhat blurred in singing. Now 84 years old, blind with cataracts, Kirk Irwin is a lonely man who says: "I walk all downtown where I used to know everyone and now I don't see anyone and no one sees me." His lasting fragment of fame may be this verse of **The Midnight Special.**

The stanza relates to the legal procedure under the Texas habitual criminal law which provides an indeterminate ("intermediate") sentence from five years to life imprisonment after a third felony conviction. The use of the feminine gender in referring to the governor identifies the stanza with Mariam C. "Ma" Ferguson who held office 1925-27 and again 1933-35. The stanza was published in **"American Ballads and Folk Songs",** and according to Alan Lomax came from either Leadbelly or Ironhead. Chances are it was the latter since Leadbelly was free of the Texas prison during her administration.

Kirk Irwin nodded vaguely when asked if he recalled anyone known as Leadbelly—who worked for the Houston Buick agency and gained a minor police record in the city following his pardon. "I remember a great big fellow," Irwin said. "Always played guitar and sang when you'd take him in. That the one? Some of the boys would see him on the street and pick him up just to hear him make up songs. Great big, black man."

Four of these officers are recorded in one of Leadbelly's stanzas:

"Bason an' Brock will arrest you,
Payton an' Boone will take you down;
The judge will sentence you,
An' you Sugar Land bound."

Fragments of other lines remembered were "Jack Smith sittin' on appeal", and "Sheriff got him 'bout forty years more."

With the Sheriff's name slurred in the singing, the song has spread throughout the Texas prison system:

"Or Sheriff Benson will arrest you,
He will carry you down.
If the jury finds you guilty,
Then you're Sugarland bound."

Following the jailbreak incident, Jack Smith was sent to the penitentiary and labeled #50344 to serve his twenty-five year term for armed robbery. He served slightly over one year. During this first year, while Pat Neff was governor, pardons were exceptionally scarce. Leadbelly managed to obtain one after having charmed the Governor with an evening of songs, concluded by an especially composed plea for his release. Even then, Neff waited until the last few days of his term before granting Leadbelly's pardon. A few months later, Jack Smith obtained a pardon by using different resources. The Ferguson regime succeeded Pat Neff. Unable to run himself after being impeached, Big Jim Ferguson blandly had the voters elect his wife and things were as before. Three months after "Ma" Ferguson came to office, Jack Smith, son of a well-to-do Austin family, was granted a pardon.

The distinctive text now associated with **The Midnight Special** seems to have begun as a progression from a cycle of jail songs common in Texas. Interchange of texts is particularly common between songs such as **Down In The Valley** (Birmingham Jail, etc.) **Hard Times, Poor Boy** (Durant Jail, Cryderville Jail, etc.). The lines and fairly fixed rimes lend themselves to topical events. **"Negro Folk Songs as sung by Leadbelly"** provides a transcription of his **The Shreveport Jail** which has verses and sentiments in common with, and seems to lie exactly midway between all three songs: **The Midnight Special, Down In The Valley,** and **Hard Times, Poor Boy.**

Growing out of a loosely knit group of jail songs, the narrative of a 1923 Houston jailbreak seems to have then passed on to the prison farms, evolving finally as a person-by-person account of those foremost in a convict's mind.

"Yonder comes Miss Rosie,
How in the world do you know?
I can tell by her apron,
And the dress she wore.

Umbrella on her shoulder,
Piece a paper in her hand,
Goes a-marching to the Captain,
Says, 'I want my man'."

Doubtless there were other songs which contributed to **The Midnight Special**'s formation—an old spiritual contributed the lines of the chorus and perhaps the tune—but the best known version mentioning a specific Houston sheriff must have taken shape during his term. Binford's eighteen years as Harris County sheriff began in 1919. Others mentioned in the song held office during this same period.

The deceptive titles of much folk music make it difficult to determine the earliest recordings of the song. Around 1925 there was a **Midnight Special** by Sodarisa Miller on the Paramount label. Sam Collins recorded a **Midnight Special Blues** for Gennett in 1927.

The song's first publication was in Carl Sandburg's **"The American Songbag",** in 1927. It is Alan Lomax's belief that this version was obtained from his father's early collections of Texas lore. Sandburg failed to credit his source. The later Lomax books **"American Ballads and Folk Songs"** and the Leadbelly volume published distinctive variants. Now, of course, it is standard in all anthologies.

The Library of Congress archives include seven recordings, the earliest from the Texas penitentiary "walls" at Huntsville, sung by Jesse Bradley in 1934. Later recordings were made by Leadbelly while in the Louisiana prison at Angola, by the Gant family of Austin, by several convict groups at Mississippi's Parchman Farm, and finally by Woody Guthrie in 1940. All of these were collected by John and Alan Lomax.

It was the title song of the historic RCA Victor album of prison songs made by Leadbelly in 1940. Pete Seeger's transcription of this record appears in B. A. Botkin's **A Treasury of American Folklore.** Here Leadbelly sings, unlike his other recordings, the line referring to "Sheriff Benson". Leadbelly, who certainly knew the Houston sheriff's proper name, may have been influenced by the printed versions then circulating. Pete Seeger also admits he may have erred in transcribing the exact name Leadbelly sang.

Since then, the song has been recorded twice again by Leadbelly and by artists such as Odetta, Big Bill Broonzy, Pete Seeger, The Weavers, and Josh White. Blues shouter Joe Turner has contributed a rock 'n' roll version, dance bands have recorded instrumental arrangements, and movie star Andy Griffith's recording has had a fling on the hit parade.

"Well, you wake up in the morning,
Hear the ding-dong ring,
Go marchin' to the table,
See the same damn thing.

Knife and fork on the table,
Nothing in my pan,
If you say anything about it,
You're in trouble with the man."

Despite the song's widespread fame, Sheriff Binford had never heard it except from his own prison charges Three of these men have been identified as former members of the Houston police force. A. W. Brock was chief of police for a time. George Payton and Johnnie Boone were a team of city detectives who specialized in prowling the Negro wards. There was at one time a song devoted to these two although no text has yet been found. Boone is now deceased according to his former buddy, George Payton, who in recent years has served as house officer at the Texas State Hotel.

Sheriff T. A. Binford

"Well, yonder comes Dr. Melton.
How in the world do you know?
Well, he gave me a tablet,
Just the day befo'.

Well, there never was a doctor,
Travel through the land,
That could cure the fever
Of a convict man."

No physician by this name was ever employed in the Texas prison system. Of the three Dr. Meltons listed by the Texas State Board of Examiners, none were in practice near any of the prison farms. Unlike the many other persons named and accurately described by the ballad, Dr. Melton eludes the grasp of research. The consensus of ex-convicts and ex-guards who were asked about a "Dr. Melton" was that he may have been a hospital steward at one of the farms, titled by his fellow prisoners. Two men remembered in the vaguest way someone called by this name.

None of the physicians employed by the prison were found to have a first name such as Milton or Melton. The text can be taken to suggest a convict steward—who'd be handing out salt tablets, aspirin, and bromides constantly—rather than a physician who'd only appear in the event of more serious illness. Houston physician Robert K. Blair who was at one time medical officer for Clemens, Ramsey, Harlem, Retrieve, Darrington, Blue Ridge, and Central farms, recalled the use of convict stewards as typical practice." You take an intelligent murderer who's going to be in at least five or ten years and a doctor can train him and be able to depend on him just as you would on an Army corpsman."

"One day, one day,
I was walking along,
I heard the Midnight Special
Blowing a lonesome song."

The Midnight Special is but one of the songs which have flown from the rich springs of the Texas prison system. This ballad remembers the jail officials just as **Black Betty** remembers the whip and **Shorty George** recalls the Sunday visitors' train from Houston. **Ol' Riley Walked the Water** and **Here Rattler Here** and **Long John** tell the escape legends. **Go Down Ol' Hannah** pleads with hot, hanging sun. **Ain't No More Cane On The Brazos** and **Hammer Ring** and **Pick A Bale Of Cotton** and **Choppin In The New Ground** describe the relentless "rolling" of a man on these vast convict plantations.

On the most recent recording trip to the prisons, these songs were again found in tradition. Pete Seeger who initiated the 1951 visit, together with Houston Folklore Group members John Lomax Jr. and Chester Bower, recorded a new verse (above) which the prisoners had added to **The Midnight Special** as well as such new songs as the eloquent and mystic **Grizzly Bear.** The original tapes from this trip are now in the Library of Congress, and an interesting but poorly organized selection of them has been released on a Folkways lp. Four other selections have been included in **"A Treasury of Field Recordings"** which has been released on the English 77 label. With the magnificent recordings from Mississippi's Parchman Farm made by Alan Lomax and released by Tradition records, these are the only example of actual convict singing available outside the Library of Congress discs.

Looked at from afar, prison songs are easily misunderstood. The understatement, the wry, almost comic tone is misleading. In singing for themselves the men need only hint at their meanings. An article such this adds only literal understanding of the refereces. The songs themselves tell their story best. Listening to the entire group of songs from the Texas prison farms, one glimpses the reality of life on these slavery-oriented institutions. Ultimately, the glimpse is terrifying. The songs are often a prisoner's last hold on his sanity. The escape of Long John is a glorious, treasured event in history. The blam-ba-lams of **Black Betty** are the scars on a man's body. "You ought to been on the river nineteen and four, you could find a dead man on every turnrow . . ." means exactly that. These songs are a proud evidence of suffering and the prisoners' ability to rise above it. Only the convicts themselves can enjoy the cynicism of such jokes: "Get up dead man, help me hoe my row . . ."

From time to time a Houston newspaper will run an item indicating present conditions in the prison. Recently a one paragraph note stated that several dozen convicts had cut their heel tendons and used other forms of self-mutilation to escape work in the fields.

Working twelve or more hours a day in the naked, sunscorched land of the river bottoms, the men are subject to torture at the slightest mistake or a guard's whim. Routinely, they are kicked by mud-crusted boots and held under the perpetual threat of death from a shotgun blast. One famed guard employed a moron's method of counting. Collecting his gang at the beginning of a work day, he'd pick up a stone for each prisoner. In the evening he'd discard one for each man returning to barracks. If, for any reason, the men and stones failed to even out, the guard's solution was to beat the men with a chain.

A former inmate of the Ramsey farm has described the night hours. "You are placed on a narrow bench with your feet straight out and your hands behind you. Handcuffs are then snapped on. Sometimes a convict's wrists swell so much they lose the use of their hands. You have to get up and get just the same—they have a graveyard there all their own."

"I'm going away to leave you,
An' my time ain't long,
The man is gonna call me,
An' I'm going home.

Then I'll be done all my grievin,
Whoopin, hollerin, an' a-cryin;
Then I'll be done all my studyin,
'Bout my great long time."

This article appeared in CARAVAN, the Magazine of Folk Music, and is reprinted by permission of Billy Fehr, editor. Research for this article was sponsored by the Houston Folklore Group. Thanks are due Rae Korson, Library of Congress; T. A. Binford, Hempstead, Texas; J. C. Roberts, Texas Department of Corrections; John Lomax, Jr., Houston; Alan Lomax, New York; Pete Seeger, Beacon, N.Y.; Dr. R. K. Blair, Houston; and others who wish to remain anonymous