

“Tell Me How About It” (Mr. Tom’s Blues). Decca 7766

This was a Mr. Tom J. Mann on whose farm was a sharecropper:

“Mr. Tom lives in the country, Mr. Robert lives in town”

Mr. Robert was Mr. Tom’s son-in-law, who didn’t like the country.

“Who’s been telling you Buddy Brown Blues”. Decca 7279

“Gonna get up in the morning and do like Buddy Brown,

I’m gonna eat my breakfast, and baby, I b’lieve I’ll lie back down.”

Apparently Buddy Brown was a friend of John’s in Chicago, and John told him he would put him in a record. (Bang goes another mythological folk-hero!)

“Easin’ Back to Tennessee”. Decca 7516

Estes sings an address in this blues: it goes — “Now, 2244 West Hubbard Avenue,

That’s where you got my 1932”.

Apparently this was a record-store that stocked John’s records. Thus he gave it a free plug. But the meaning of 1932 is a little more obscure. I asked him what it meant and he said it was his “blues”. This is hard to understand, for he didn’t record a 1932 blues — and in any case this was 1938. Perhaps 1932 was an idiom of the time merely meaning blues in the same way that we might say 1932’s for blues as a sort of rhyming slang. 1932 was of course also the Depression time generally associated with the blues. Possibly 1932 held some purely personal meaning for John relating to some experience in that year.

“Now I woke up this morning, couldn’t hardly see,

Snow on the ground ‘bout eight foot deep”.

John mentioned that he was staying on one side of Chicago and his friends were on the other, and with all the snow on the ground, he was worried they wouldn’t be able to meet up, and he was very lonely. This implies that he was singing about his experiences the previous August, for West Hubbard Avenue is (I gather) in Chicago, whereas as far as can be ascertained, this session was made in New York.

“Liquor Store Blues”. Decca 7491

Estes sings:— “I met Mr. Peter’s down on Monmouth Street,

and:— “Mr. Peter Adams, the discount man,

You ask him for a favour, you won’t feel ashamed”.

Peter Adams — again a white man in view of the Mr. — ran a liquor store in Forest City, Ark. He is referred to as “the discount man” as he sold liquor at lower prices than usual. The discount store is apparently a fairly common thing in the States. People charge lower prices than normal and save on overheads by giving less service.

“Hobo Jungle Blues”. Decca 7354

“Now if you hobo to Brownsville, you better not be peeping out,

Mr. Whitten will get you, and Mr. Guy will wear you out”.

The meaning of this is that you must not be seen peeping out of the boxcar, with your head showing, or you would be caught by Mr. Whitten, who Estes described as “tough law” and he would turn you over to Mr. Guy, who was a Mr. Guy Hare, the boss up on the County Farm about four miles from Brownsville.

“Fire Department Blues (Martha Hardin)” Decca 7571

Martha Hardin was a woman whom John loved. She lived on North Wilson Street, and as

the verse tells you, after the fire moved over to Bradford Street.

“Little Laura Blues”. BB B8871

Little Laura was a girl called Laura Duberry that John was very fond of. She was very young, and the wife of a man named Duberry who ran a whiskey house in the dry County of Madison.

“Vernita Blues”. Decca 7342

She was a girlfriend of John’s who gave him a lot of trouble and ran off with another man.

“Mary Come On Home”. Decca 7789

Another girlfriend. One line runs:— “Took little Mary down to Tiptonville.”

Tiptonville is apparently in Ridgely County.

Francis Smith, (January 1965)

RUBIN LACY

Rev. Rubin Lacy was born January 2nd, 1901 in Pelahatchie, Miss., the fourth of thirteen children. His father was a fireman at a gas house in Jackson and died in 1911. Lacy was then raised by his grandfather, who was an African Methodist preacher. He went to school for five years and worked in the afternoons.

As a child he was considered to be “peculiar” and a destined preacher, but he avoided the calling and turned to music instead. His family was fond of singing church songs, and once he organised some of his brothers and sisters together into a gospel quartet. His mother, half-brother, and eldest brother were all good harmonica players. They did mostly church songs, although the eldest brother also played pieces like “Lost John” and “Fox and Hounds”. His brother-in-law, Walter McCray, was a good guitarist and singer of old songs like “John Henry” and “Stagolee” and “Rabbit on a Log”. Lacy didn’t learn much from these people, however, although he liked their music. His real idol was George “Crow Jane” Hendrix. This man was a professional musician and the finest Lacy ever heard. He was old enough to be Lacy’s father. “A whole lot of music and songs, George brought it in existence. He was some musician. You don’t find them these days like George Hendrix. He could play anything he sat down to or anything he picked up, organ, piano, violin, bass violin, mandolin, ukelele. Anything he put his hands on he could play it . . . He would just make up a lot of things and make songs out of it”. He was especially good on the guitar, playing either with a bottleneck or with his naked hands. He had a fine voice too. Lacy regrets that he was never recorded. “But at the time he was playing the blues, the record business wasn’t out then or just was coming out. And when the record business come out, he was in the church playing”. He had joined the Sanctified Church and died in the 1930’s.

Lacy began playing guitar and mandolin in his early teens, imitating Hendrix both vocally and instrumentally. Much of his style that he later brought to Jackson bore the imprint of Hendrix’s music. “And they tell me that I got to be some better than him in a way, but I don’t think so”. Hendrix had a string band in Pelahatchie along with Ed Lewis, Clem Banks and some others. Lacy taught his brother to play guitar and he eventually became better than Rubin but is now also a minister and doesn’t play.

Another important early influence on Rev. Lacy's life was his uncle, Robert Herbert Meiels, a full-blooded German from Berlin. He had served in the German army and received an excellent education including the knowledge of five languages. Lacy learned the German language from him and a great deal about history and world affairs. "He taught me the biggest that I know, politically and everything else. He was the wisest man I ever saw." Lacy and Meiels later travelled north together.

At the age of 20 Lacy moved to Jackson to become a musician. He started out playing with Son Spand from Brandon in Rankin County. "He and I started off together as a two man band. He played guitar and mandolin . . . This fellow Gopher (Taylor) . . . he began to blow a comb following us." Taylor also played harmonica.

Lacy did not stay there too long. He began doing railroad work in Mississippi and advanced to the positions of brakeman and section boss. Here he met the white singer Jimmy Rodgers, a brakeman on the A & B (later IC) Railroad. Rodgers later went on to make records about a year before Lacy did. He did not stay too long there but drifted north to Iowa to work on the railroads there. Then he went to Chicago and joined Meiels there. He spent about two years as checker for the National Linen Supply. He had slacked off in his music during this period. He left here and did some highway work in Kankakee, Ill. Then he went to Ohio to work again on the railroads and was present there when President Harding's funeral train passed by in August, 1923. He returned to Mississippi shortly thereafter.

He soon resumed his career in Jackson as a musician with Son Spand. This became the nucleus of a fast-growing group of excellent and important blues singers. "I was the leader of my gang such as Charlie McCoy . . . He'd follow me just like I was his daddy until he learned to play it. But I really believe Charlie got to be a better musician than I was. He was young but he got to be about the best musician there was in our band." McCoy played guitar and mandolin and later went on to make records. Then there was Walter Vincent, a guitar player and singer who later went on to fame as a member of the Mississippi Shieks, a string band of the late 1920's and early 1930's. "Now Charlie couldn't sing at all. Walter was a good songster. He could sing. If I didn't sing, Walter would. Tommy was a good songster. Ishmon was a good songster". These last two names refer to Tommy Johnson and Ishmon Bracey, two others who later made records. "We would serenade so many nights a week unless we had a dance to play . . . We'd just walk the streets and go to playing. We'd all be together. When we started music, then the folks would start to calling, hollering, white and coloured, rich and poor. Well, we'd go prop our foots, maybe, on the steps, play'em a few pieces. They'd give us big tips. We'd go on to the next one . . . That of itself would give us a whole lot of dances." The popular steps back then were the Black Bottom to fast music and blues, the two-step to slower music, the waltz and the Shimmie She Wa Wa. This was the popular music of that day. The old-fashioned music was called "flang-dang music" and people did the square dance to it. Sometimes they would have a piano or drums with the band, but it was mostly stringed instruments. To provide volume they used picks in their instruments. They played for white dances more often than for coloured and sang blues right along with waltzes and two step numbers. "I know the time when there just wasn't any white musicians much".

The make-up of the group varied from time to time as musicians would leave town and return or go off individually to play. New musicians were always dropping in. "Lots of people would come there in Jackson, in and out, and just didn't live there. If he could play anything or sing anything, naturally we boys that lived there would always welcome

other musicians. Naturally you couldn't tell what you could learn from them. A lot of those boys that come from those little towns out from Jackson, none of them much was homesteaded there. I would come as near to being homesteaded there as any of the boys that ever played with me." They all got along well with each other and traded off ideas. "Before they started to making these records, the biggest of them boys that played music with me would help anybody to learn. But I reckon after they started to making records, they got jealous, I guess, thought the other fellow would steal his songs." Lacy was possibly the most prominent member of the group. "When I was playing music in those days, I was called 'the Blues King' . . . A lot of people got a lot of tunes and way of singing their songs really from me." But he considers the best all-round singer and instrumentalist to have been Tommy Johnson. He was a forceful guitarist. "He'd hit it hard sometimes according to how he feel, you know. Tommy was a pretty heavy drinker sometimes, and he'd get high sometimes and hit pretty hard. But he was a good musician. I liked to hear him sing that song about 'I asked her for water and she give me gasoline.' I thought he could play that thing and sing it . . . You know. I could play that thing in those days 'bout as good as he could. . . Changed my voice just like him. Oh yeah, I could change my voice. I was a good songster. The voice changing refers to singing the words of some blues in falsetto voice. This is sometimes also called "yodelling". "We learned one from another. Just like we learned his songs, he learned ours . . . Anything we played Tommy go to the place he could play it too . . . Just like him and Charlie (McCoy), They made that record together . . . Part of those records that they made, Charlie McCoy learned it from me." In addition to a lot of blues they would play songs like "Careless Love", "It Ain't Going to Rain No More". "Casey Jones", and a lot of instrumental and waltz numbers.

Around 1927 Lacy set out for the Delta where he proved to be a very successful musician. "I went to Yazoo City and started me another small band. We had drums there". There was also a bass violin and Lacy on guitar or mandolin. He drifted around through towns like Canton, Boyle, Ruleville and Dockery playing on the streets and meeting other musicians such as Charlie Patton and Son House who was just starting out then. In late 1927 he settled in the area of Itta Bena and Greenwood and became overseer of a plantation. There he met Ralph Lembo from Itta Bena, the owner of a furniture store and promoter of musicians for various record companies. "Ralph was telling me that Mr. Laibley and this machine would be in Memphis a certain day. He was going to take Rev. Thornton and Rev. Cotton up there and wanted to carry me up there to meet Mr. Laibley and let him hear me . . . Thornton and Cotton made a record. I played to be heard and was told I would go to Chicago to make a record. I didn't make no records there that day. I went to Itta Bena and afterwards we got another notice to come to Chicago. That's where I made my record, in Chicago, on the 9th floor, in March, on Jackson Blvd. and Wabash Ave. I think it was Lamar Life (Ins. Co.)." Actually the Memphis session was for Columbia. Lacy played four songs but none were issued. Laibley was from Paramount Records. He somehow managed to be at the Columbia session and signed up Lacy and Rev. Cotton. Rev. Lacy relates an interesting story about Rev. Cotton at the session. "He got happy preaching, I think, about "Somebody Touched Me", the time when the woman touched the hem of Christ's garment. He got happy, and when the red light come on for him to stop, he wouldn't stop . . . And so he told me that day, "I'm going to make this record this time, but I don't mean to make them another one. I ain't going to mess up God's word that way. When I get happy I have to be choked down."

That's the words he told. I never will forget that. A few years after that Cotton died. But Thornton, he made his record."

Lacy and Lembo went up to Chicago together in March, 1928 and Lacy recorded two songs, "Mississippi Jail House Groan" and "Ham Hound Crave" (mistake for 'Gravy') accompanied by his own guitar and released as Paramount 12629. The spoken interjection on the latter piece is by Lembo. There were some other artists there that day but Lacy can't remember their names. Both of these songs were learned from George Hendrix. Paramount had asked for blues but left the selection of the songs otherwise up to Lacy. He had been practicing others, but these two came to his mind first. The record sold moderately well. Lacy was paid for recordings and also got some royalties, but he was displeased in general with the amount and decided not to record again. He thought that Lembo made too much of the money, although they still remained good friends. "My record made Ralph so much money and he done so well in being my manager until he got a tree and he called me one day down there and says, "Rube, I got a tree up there. Let's go up there and you and me set it out. Set it out right there in my front yard." So we went up there, and we set the tree out. He says, "Now this tree is named Rube Lacy. As long as this tree lives, it'll be named Rube Lacy to remember you."

While in Chicago he arranged to meet the famous Paramount recording artist, Blind Lemon Jefferson. "I met Blind Lemon through Mr. Laibley. Mr. Laibley said he found Blind Lemon on the streets playing in Dallas, Texas. He walked up to him and asked him to play a tune. He lit out to playing. Then he brought him up to Chicago . . . and had him record. And so he began to . . . make a record every month. He did that until he died. . . We got acquainted. It was published that I was the best musician-blues player there was in the South and Blind Lemon was the best blues player there was in the West. . . I invited Blind Lemon to come to Itta Bena and visit me, which he did, and we played in the theatre in Greenwood and the theatre in Moorhead together. And he stayed around there, I think, a week or two with me, played first one place, then another, 'til he had to go back again to make another record, because he had to make one a month. Directly after that he just died, I think, overnight. Some say he was just too fat. I know one thing, if you go to sleep here in the house at night, you could hear him snoring I don't know how far. And they say he just died overnight from being too fat, just smothered to death . . . He was kind, wouldn't play a guitar on Sunday for nobody, I don't care what you offered him. I seed a fellow offer him \$20 to play him one song one morning. Two men walked up and said, "We'll give you ten dollars apiece if you'll play 'Blues come through Texas loping like a mule'. Shook his head . . . he say, 'I couldn't play it if you give me \$200. I need the money but I couldn't play it. My mother always taught me not to play on Sunday for nobody. Today is Sunday.' And I spoke and said, 'I'll play it. I might as well play it on a Sunday as play it on a Monday.' And they asked me, 'Rube, can you play that?' And I said, 'Yeah, I can play anything he play.' They said, 'Well, play it. We'll give it to you.' So I lit out playing 'Blues come through Texas loping like a mule' and they give me the \$20."

Lacy thinks Blind Lemon had a good voice but "had everything in the same tune. I could get by him . . . I could play his songs, and he couldn't play mine . . . If you notice well, nearly everything he played had the same tune to it. . . He had a kind of loping play. I could do it when I was playing back there. . . The fact of it, a lot of folks called me 'Lemon'." Both Lemon and Lacy played either with a flat pick or finger picks, but Lemon used mostly a flat pick while Lacy used fingers on his record.

He spent the next few years living prosperously as a musician in the Delta and doing other types of work until October, 1932. While working at a saw mill north of Cruger,

Miss., he was struck in the leg by a loose brake shoe from a passing train and was severely injured. When he hit the ground he heard a voice saying "The next time it will be death". The claim agent went to his bedside and cried telling Lacy to do the Lord's work. Lacy cried too, and when he recovered he went to the Missionary Baptist Church and confessed his calling to preach. He gave his guitar away and refused another one that was offered to him. "I just quit. I was begged in a way to keep a' playing. Even after I began to preach, I was begged to keep a' playing the guitar, play in the church, make church songs, I was good on church songs . . . My mind was just hard down on preaching, and I studied hard. I studied so hard, when I was a young man preaching, until I can go on, I reckon for I don't know how many years. . . without even looking in the Bible every Sunday. Right now I don't have to look in the Bible to take no text."

He began as pastor for churches in Jackson and Byram and worked part time as a janitor in schools. His first full-time preaching job was in Greenwood, Miss. He preached in several other towns in Mississippi. Since then he has pastored in Arkansas and Missouri and most recently in California. He met his wife in Tunica, Miss., in the 1930's. He has had six children.

In the 1950's he received a call to come to California and preach. He started out in Los Angeles and Palmdale preaching part-time and working as janitor in a bank. He has been the pastor of the Union Baptist Church in Ridgecrest, California for the last four years. Since his arrival there, he and his parishioners have built a new church and plan to build a house for the Lacys nearby. When asked how he came to settle in a town in the middle of the Mojave Desert, he replies, "I can't go no further west unless I go in the ocean, and I'm scared of water, so I just stay here."

He has a congregation of about eighty. Almost all are fairly recently arrived from the South, and many are employed on a nearby air base. His church services preserve many older elements. There are hymnbooks, a piano, and an organ, but these are hardly ever used. Also there are Junior and Senior choirs, but both sing older songs although not quite as old as some that Rev. Lacy knows. Most songs are sung by the whole congregation led by Rev. Lacy or one of the choir members. Here one is apt to hear songs like "Amazing Grace" sung in the old 'long meter', surging, highly ornamented style or another like "I Love the Lord" lined out by deacon a with slow, arhythmic, ornamented response from the congregation. This is the kind of hymn singing that Rev. Lacy prefers. He finds that it is disappearing, however, especially with the younger members who prefer songs with a beat, harmony, and greater arrangement. Rev. Lacy also likes 'hallelujah songs' such as "Keep your Lamp trimmed and burning" and "Jesus is a Dying Bed Maker". He has a large repertoire of such numbers. Mrs. Lacy also keeps a collection of printed songs and hymnbooks.

His preaching style is traditional. He will start slowly with some text usually from the Old Testament and build up to a point where he is chanting and taking quick, in-drawn breaths and the congregation is "moaning". Then he will break off and return slowly to his earlier pace and end. The style is reminiscent of the sermons of the late Rev. Gates whom Lacy used to see at conventions. But Rev. Lacy's sermons last about fifteen minutes. "I was sitting there (in Moorhead, Miss.) playing the blues, and two big preachers walked up to me and chucked some money into my lap. They said, 'Play that again'. I played it, the blues too. And them preachers said to me, 'If I had your voice, I could move mountains.' And since then I have with that same voice pretty well removed mountains. I have convinced and converted many a man."

He is not ashamed of his old blues records or his earlier life. "I'm a funny preacher. Sometimes I preach now and I get up and tell the people now that . . . I used to be a famous blues singer and I told more truth in my blues than the average person tells in his church songs . . . The blues is just more true than a whole lot of the church songs that people sing. Sometimes I think the average person sings a church song just for the tune, not for the words, but the blues is sung not for the tune. It's sung for the words mostly. A real blues singer sings a blues for the words. The words is the meaning of the song, not the tune so much. Now you get out here to sing a church song about "When I take my vacation in Heaven." That couldn't be the truth. That's a lie in the church, because a vacation means to go and come. You don't take a vacation in Heaven. But now if you're playing the blues, you say, "I never missed my water 'til my well went dry." That's the truth. If you got a well where you got your water, when it go dry, you miss it. You got to go somewhere else and hunt a well, ain't you? You got a wife and she quit you, you may not miss her 'til she quit you. She quit you and you want her back or some other one, don't you? Well, that's the truth. That's the difference in a church song and the blues. All right, let's go further. What is the blues? Who has the blues? Sometimes the best Christian in the world have the blues quicker than a sinner do, 'cause the average sinner ain't got nothing to worry about. He do what he please, go where he please, use what he please. But a Christian is obligated to certain things and obligated not to do certain things. That sometimes cause a Christian to take the blues. What is the blues, then? It's a worried mind. It boils down to worry. Sometimes, you worry so, it cause you to jump off the Frisco bridge up here, worry so it cause you to stick a gun in you . . . That's all, it's worry. Somefolks say, "Well, he went out of his head." Well, if worry cause you to go out of your head, that's what it is. But that's the blues.

The feeling of 'blues', however, is to be distinguished sharply from the feeling when singing songs called 'blues'. "I've sung 'em (blues) on many a day and never thought I had 'em. What did I want to have the blues for, when I had everything I wanted, all the liquor, all the money and more gals than I needed? What did I need with the blues? I was playing 'em because everybody loved to hear me play 'em and I loved to play 'em. I could play 'em, yeah. I was having fun. Sometimes I'd be kind of bothered and worried as any other man would be. I wasn't lively all the time. Plenty times I would feel lonely as other people did. But as a whole I had more blues since I been preaching than I ever had when I was playing the blues. . . I had to sacrifice, I had to put down something to go to preaching. Ain't many men put down what I put down, but I had to put down a whole lot just for preaching. And I've had a heap of blues since I been preaching . . .

When I was in the world, I got as much of the world as I needed . . . I'd play sometimes better, sing better and everything when I was feeling good . . . Sometimes I'd lay down at night, wake up the next morning and get my old guitar and just tune it up and go to playing something I never played before."

His blues were not always so "personal" as one might like to believe. "Sometimes I'd propose as it happened to me in order to hit somebody else, 'cause everything that happened to one person has at some time or other happened to another one. If not, it will . . . You make the blues maybe hitting after someone else, and all the same time it's hitting you too. Some place it's gonna hit you." For instance he says about his record, "Mississippi Jail House Groan;" "You see, that didn't hit me, but it hit somebody else in Mississippi. But I was in Chicago when I was making that record. I never have been no jailbird, if you want to know the truth of it. I never have been arrested for nothing but getting drunk, and I was soon out for that. I never stayed in jail no time."

MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT

Today, Rev. Lacy lives quietly in Ridgecrest with his wife. He doesn't drink or smoke and lives very moderately in all respects. The Lacy's have been most hospitable and pleased by the interest in his career. They hope to further interest in and preserve the old gospel music.

David Evans,

(January, 1967)

Blues Unleashed

Piedmont Records will soon release the first recordings to have been made by Mississippi John Hurt since 1928. John is sixty-nine years old, in excellent health, and his musical powers remain undiminished. A 12" LP (see footnote) will be available soon. It will contain several old favorites, Avalon Blues, Candy Man Blues, Spike Driver Blues, and previously unrecorded selections — "Cow Hooking Blues, Casey Jones, Saly Dog, My Creole Belle, Joe Turner Blues, Richards Woman Blues." Also John plays two songs on harmonica — "Liza Jane" and "God's Unchanging Hand"; Casey Jones features John's magnificent twelve-string guitar.

John Hurt was born in March 1894, in Teoc, Mississippi, in the Carroll County area where he has lived all his life. He began to sing and play the guitar before he was ten (one of his songs, "My Creole Belle" is in fact the second strain of the old rag classic "Creole Belle" written by J. Bodewalt Lampe in 1900!). He remembers hearing many local and itinerant musicians, but says his style was developed completely by himself. As he grew up he played for the dance parties and 'shivarees' that are still fundamental entertainment for Negroes in that area.

Previous to his recent trip to Washington D.C., John had only two professional engagements, both of them recording dates for Okeh in 1928. Early that year Okeh recorded-ing director Tommy Rockwell came to the area to record two of John's neighbours, Willie F. Narmour and Shell W. Smith, fiddler and guitarist respectively. They had recently won a fiddlers' contest which Rockwell attended. When he signed them up to record, Rockwell asked if there were any other good musicians in the area and John was immediately recommended. John still remembers the cold rainy night when Narmour, Rockwell and an assistant knocked at his door at 2 a.m., woke him out of a sound sleep and asked John to play. Rockwell heard one song, a bit of another and asked John to be in Memphis on Valentine's Day, 1928, to make records (not in San Antonio, as he had previously reported). Eight songs were cut, out of which only two, "Frankie" and "Nobody's Dirty Business," were released. The record did fairly well, and on November 8th, 1928, a letter was despatched from New York to Mississippi:

Dear John,

We have been trying to get ahold of you for some time in order that we might make arrangements for you to come to New York for some more recordings. The first record that you made has sold fairly well, but we did not obtain satisfactory masters on the balance of your recordings.

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 selections and all your expenses to New York and return for this work.

We would like to have you get together about eight selections at least four of them to be old time tunes, similar to selections "Frankie" and "Nobody's Business". There are a great many tunes like these that are known throughout the South.

We have written to Mr. Hughes Smith, manager of the James K. Polk Inc., 3rd floor