

(Grafton, Wisconsin, November, 1931—Two known copies)

TRY ME ONE MORE TIME
(Marshall Owens *spiced*
with a bit of **Curry**)

by Alex van der Tuuk

INTRODUCTION:

Ask a collector about a memorable prewar blues recording session, chances are fair that the 1930 Charlie Patton/Son House/Willie Brown/Louise Johnson session in Grafton, Wisconsin will be mentioned, its importance reinforced by recent reissue programs of Charley Patton by Catfish Records (KATCD 180) and Revenant Records (Album No. 212).

A second best, in my opinion, is the recording session that included King Solomon Hill/Marshall Owens/Ben Curry/Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham¹, which occurred in November 1931, as will be shown later on.

There are several reasons why the Hill/Owens/Curry/Blue Jays session is intriguing. The main reason lies in the controversy over the identity of one of these artists: King Solomon Hill. Hill has been identified by collector and researcher Gayle Dean Wardlow as being Joe Holmes. Wardlow's identification of Holmes as King Solomon Hill is listed in discographies, and has been accepted by some researchers, although there is still scepticism.²

Biographical information on Owens and Curry is even sketchier, enlarging the myth of their recording sessions. The fact that not all their recordings have been unearthed expanded the myth further.

Collector Don Kent was the first to come up with information on Marshall Owens. This was published in *Living Blues* #26.³ Some nine years ago, Kent was approached by Pete Whelan to write a series of articles on Alabama artists, including Owens. However, Kent's computer crashed, locking in the information on the hard disc. When *78 Quarterly* announced Issue No. 10 on the internet, it included a presumed article on Marshall Owens.⁴ However, it will never appear. This, I learned from Don when I contacted him.⁵ Things became even more complicated when Don's 1975 fieldnotes went astray after some arduous house moving. In May 2002 a telephone interview with Don helped reconstruct Marshall Owens' life, together with the discovery of some official documents.

The following is a compilation of some old and new information on some of these artists:

Marshall Owens

Owens' family thought Marshall was born around 1880, but recently discovered information, his Social Security number and death certificate, give several different options. Collector Don Kent discovered that Owens died in May 1974 at a nursing home in Bessemer, Jefferson

County, Alabama.⁶ The first time Kent started to look for Marshall Owens was in 1968 or 1969. "I was just looking through these old phone books in Grand Central Station (NYC), which covered all the major cities throughout the United States. I happened to look in the (Birmingham) phonebook, and Owens was listed. I tried to call him up, and it was disconnected."

During intervals of several years, Kent made several calls. Finally, in 1975, he got Marshall Owens' nephew on the phone. The nephew had been raised by Marshall Owens. Kent explained he considered making a field trip to Alabama, and the nephew said to come by and see him. When Kent met with Owens' nephew "he told me he was in this nursing home." Kent went over to the nursing home only to find out that Owens had died the previous year. The nephew didn't even know he had died!⁷

Based on Owens' month and year of death, I checked the www.ancestry.com web page for the Social Security Death Index. The following information on Owens came to light:

SSN: 417-26-9283
BORN: December 2, 1890
DIED: May 1974
RESIDENCE: 35020
Bessemer, Jefferson, AL
ISSUED: Alabama
(before 1951)

I requested a copy of Owens' application for a Social Security number, and it revealed date-of-birth information that was different from the Social Security Death Index.

Was Owens 10 years younger than earlier estimates?

Owens had applied for a Social Security number on September 26, 1944. On this application he listed his date of birth as July 11, 1892, but he also listed his age at his last birthday as 49 years. This would mean he was born in 1895! Yet, a still different date of birth is found on his death certificate: March 15, 1890. An "informant," listed on the death certificate as Mrs. Louise M. Ward of 936 Center Place, S.W., in Bessemer, Alabama, may have provided this information. Although Owens was being treated by a doctor for the last months (or even years) of his life, he may well have given the 1890 birthdate himself—all of which reveals that Owens was much younger (by at least 10 years) than was earlier surmised.

His father's name was listed on the 1944 Social Security application as Tom Owens and his mother's name as Sallie

Love. Their names were unknown at the time of Marshall Owens' death (the Death Certificate listed his parents as "unknown").

Marshall Owens listed his place of birth as Talboton [sic Talbotton], Talbot County in Georgia. Talbotton lies 100 miles north of Atlanta, and today, it has a population of around 1000. When Owens filled in his application, he was at least able to write his name. He also wrote down the names of his parents himself, as well as the town where he was living. All other information appeared in a different handwriting.

Unlike Owens' father (Tom), his mother (Sallie) is listed in the 1900 Georgia census (microfilm records). However, a Tom Owens was listed in the 1900 Alabama census microfilm records. No information was found on Marshall. It's possible he lived with another relative at the time.

As a young man, Marshall Owens left Georgia and moved to Mobile, Alabama around 1900. According to Don Kent, people matured much faster in those years. Initially, Owens played banjo in the Mobile area. Then, during World War I, he picked up the guitar. It was at this time that he moved to Jefferson County, just outside of Birmingham. Don Kent: "He didn't live in Birmingham until the 1920s or later, but it's possible he lived in the area, probably moved around, but still stayed close to Birmingham."⁸

Owens obviously had at least one sister, since he raised a nephew, who was born in the 1920s. Although Kent visited the nephew in 1975, his name was unlisted and later, couldn't be traced. He was about 50 years of age.⁹

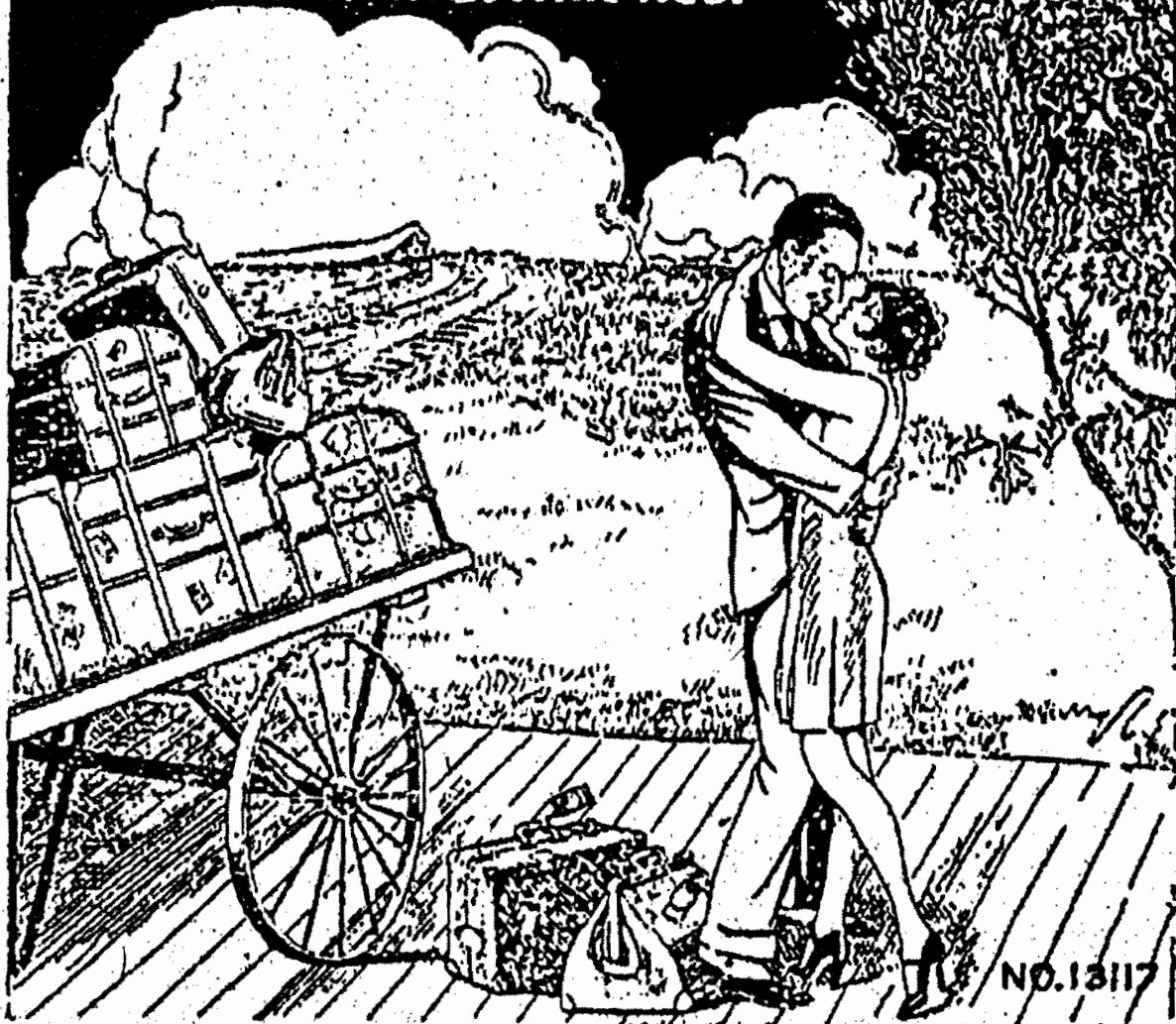
A note on the Grafton recording sessions:

At the time (November, 1931) The Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham, Ben Curry, Marshall Owens, and King Solomon Hill recorded in Grafton, it was Paramount's policy to house Black musicians in Milwaukee's Black district, around Third Street. When they were needed for recording in Grafton, the musicians took the interurban from Milwaukee to Grafton. Pressing foreman Alfred Schultz would take them back to Milwaukee by car.¹⁰

According to Dick Mushlitz, who visited the main plant in Port Washington in 1949, he met a janitor who had worked for Paramount. Since there was no hotel for African-American musicians to stay at,* they had to stay with one of the few black families that lived in or near Grafton.¹¹

"TEXAS BLUES"

VOCAL WITH GUITAR ACC.



13131—Texas Blues Part II—Vocal
7th Street Alley Strut
Guitar Acc. Marshall Owens 50c

13117—Texas Blues—Vocal
Try Me Once More 50c
Sung by Marshall Owens—with Guitar Acc.

(Despite this F.W. Boerner ad,
Paramount 13131 still hasn't been found!)
(courtesy of Port Washington Research Center and Alex van der Tuuk)

When African-American musicians arrived at the Grafton studio building to transact business, they weren't allowed to climb the front stairs to the office. They had to use the freight elevator to the second floor where the office was.¹²

The total amount of recordings for their November, 1931 session would take several days.

Their recordings were allotted matrix numbers in the so-called L-Matrix series, L-1230 to L-1266. Some matrix numbers are still untraced, although the missing King Solomon Hill record, Paramount 13125, was found in Port Washington recently.¹³ It's open for speculation whether the missing matrix numbers belong to any of these artists. It's well possible another band or artist recorded in between these sessions, as had happened with Tommy Johnson and Ishmon Bracey (L-225 to L-250). Two German titles, located at the Mills Music Archive and with matrix numbers L-235 and L-238, had been sandwiched into that session.¹⁴

They didn't record in January, 1932!

Matrix numbers L-1270 to L-1284 were recorded on November 22, 1931. This date has been established by Alfred Puls, who played tuba in a polka band, called "The South Side Orchestra of Two Rivers" (a town in Wisconsin).

Matrix numbers L-1206 and L-1207 are recordings by Sig Heller. Heller has an October 16, 1931 letter from the New York Recording Laboratories, signed by Henry Stephany, to record four titles, including the ones for L-1206/7. Heller recalled that he recorded a week or two after receiving the letter. The session would have been on a Saturday or Sunday, because the band members were going to college at that time.

Therefore, the Birmingham group that included Owens, Hill, Curry, and The Famous Blues Jay Singers of Birmingham, recorded before November 22, 1931—not the January, 1932 date given in *Blues and Gospel Records*, fourth edition. It certainly rules out a Spring date, referred to by Mrs. Roberta Allums for the Joe Holmes/King Solomon Hill session in *Blues Unlimited* #148/149.¹⁵

Owens' Songs...

In Grafton, Owens recorded three sides on his own, accompanying himself on guitar.¹⁶ His "Texas Blues" incorporated Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere" musical theme. Coincidentally, the Mississippi-based artist William Harris recorded "Keep Your Man Out Of Birmingham" (a Harry Charles song listed in the Gennett files as "Jefferson County Blues") during an October 9,

1928 field recording in Birmingham for Gennett. Don Kent: "If you listen close to it, it's a stripped down version of 'Texas Blues.' It's got the same descending bass, and it's very skeletal. But if you listen to 'Texas Blues,' if it's not the same song, it's closely related. When William Harris was living in Birmingham, he may have seen Marshall Owens or heard a very similar song played then."

"Try Me One More Time" resembles "Tired Of Being Mistreated" by Clifford Gibson. Kent: "That may have been a melody that was around, adapted by musicians for their own purposes."¹⁷

According to David Evans, "Owens sounds like he plays a 12-string guitar, or perhaps there are two guitars."¹⁸ After carefully listening to Marshall Owens' "Texas Blues" and "Try Me One More Time," Paul Swinton reached the following conclusions: both titles are played on the same guitar, and there is only one guitar being played. There are certain single-run passages that do sound as though they could be played on an instrument that has been "double strung." But I'd say that if it's a 12-string being played, then it hasn't been conventionally strung (i.e. with octave strings on G D A and the Bass E). Perhaps it was "double strung" or partially "double string"—a practice used by several old bluesmen on occasion, including Barbecue Bob.¹⁹

Owens was bitter: (his song "Red Cross Store" was stolen...)

Owens also claimed to have written "Red Cross Store," and he was bitter about those who stole it from him. Owens never recorded the song. However, other blues singers did—and got composer credits. It's possible that Owens based "Red Cross Store" on a series of events that began in Birmingham in 1931. That year, the American Red Cross opened three stores in Birmingham "to distribute large quantities of vegetables canned during the Food Conservation Campaign." Three more Red Cross stores opened in 1932. However, the distribution of food and clothes was uneven, and it was criticized as discriminatory. A year later, blues singers in the Birmingham area had begun focusing in on the Red Cross's discriminatory attitude. On July 17, 1933, Walter Roland and Lucille Bogan (as "Bessie Jackson") became the first to use the subject for recordings (as "Red Cross Blues" and "Red Cross Man," respectively).²⁰ Others who recorded "Red Cross Blues" included Walter Davis, Sonny Scott, Washboard Trio, and Leadbelly.

Owens' "Texas Blues-Part II" on Paramount 13131 remains unfound. The other side, "Seventh St. Alley Strut," features an instrumental duet with Ben Curry. (Seventh Street runs Northwest to Southeast on the fringes of downtown Birmingham. The adjacent districts are Graymont and East Thomas. Lucille Bogan reportedly lived in East Thomas for awhile.²¹)

Although *Blues and Gospel Records* lists Curry as the guitarist and Owens as the banjo-mandolinist, a 1932 Hollywood Premium Record Guide gives the accompaniment for Paramount 13131 as "Mandolin-Banjo and Guitar Acc. by Ben Curry and Marshall Owens," indicating the correct accompaniment. Vreede gives the accompaniment for the instrumental on Paramount 13131 as "Mandolin-Banjo and Guitar Acc. by Ben Curry."²²

According to Don Kent, Owens spoke frequently about his recording session. Owens' nephew knew he had made records. Owens had had copies of the Paramounts when the nephew was very young, but they were lost about 30 years before Kent spoke to the nephew. The records were broken or misplaced, possibly when Owens was moving out of the Birmingham area.²³

Further information from Owens' Social Security application reveals that his last full-time job ended in the midst of the Depression: December 15, 1934. It was a construction job at 40 cents per hour for eight hours a day, which at that time was considered pretty good money. (That same year, Wisconsin Chair Company employees were paid 35 cents an hour!) A possible explanation for Owens' relatively high wages may be that he worked on one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal projects. This was three years after his recording session. The implication is that he was not then a self-supporting musician because of the Depression.

Ten years later, at the time of his application, Owens was living in Hayneville, Lowndes County, Alabama. The application lists him as being single (checked as [V] from five options—married, single, widowed, divorced, or separated). Today, Hayneville, about 100 miles south of Birmingham, has some 970 inhabitants.

As a musician, Owens moved with the times; he bought an electric guitar after World War II and played it regularly throughout the 1950s.

From his Death Certificate we learn that at some point Owens got married. However, at the time of his death, he was widowed, according to his Death Certificate. No marriage certificate was found.²⁴

Later, he moved back to Birmingham.



(c. October, 1929)



(October 9, 1928)

Owens' songs show cross-influences with Charlie Patton, William Harris, and Clifford Gibson...

"Owens' "Texas Blues" encompasses Patton's "High Water" and Harris' "Keep Your Man Out of Birmingham" musical themes (above). "Try Me One More Time" resembles Gibson's "Tired Of Being Mistreated" (right).



(c. June, 1929)

where he worked as a miner for the U.S. Pipe Company for most of his working life. At that time Owens lived at 3364 31st Street, North.²⁵

In the late 1950s Owens was still playing guitar until a "cerebrovascular accident" incapacitated him completely.²⁶ According to his nephew, he remained fairly active and lucid up to that point. His nephew put him in a nursing home, the Ruby Hill Nursing Home, just outside of Bessemer. Owens was becoming more senile as the years progressed.²⁷ Owens' senility probably led to less frequent visits from his nephew. This may have been the reason the nephew didn't know Owens had died in 1974. It would also explain why the nephew's name isn't listed on the death certificate.

Owens dead at 84!

From December 21, 1973 until his death on May 1, 1974, Owens was under the care of a Dr. R. Ingram, who was treating him (possibly for a heart condition) at the Ruby Hill Nursing Home. The physician visited him for the last time on

April 28. Owens died on May 1, 1974 at 1:35 A.M.. The immediate cause of death was listed as Cardio-Pulmonary Arrest. No autopsy was done.

Marshall Owens was buried on May 5, 1974 at Woodlawn Cemetary, 1110 Seventh Avenue, North, in Birmingham.

There was no information on Mrs. Louise M. Ward, the Death Certificate informant. When Don Kent visited Marshall Owens' nephew, he asked if there were any photographs. "The nephew said there had been some, but they were all thrown away for one reason or another. He didn't have any on hand. In fact, he didnt even let me in the house, and I sort of interviewed him on the stoop. Amenable, but he wasn't like, hospitable. He seemed a little wary."²⁸

Currently, the Ruby Hill Nursing home is unlisted. This makes it problematic in trying to trace Owens' nephew (if he's still alive!). When I contacted the U.S. Pipe Company's main plant for Owens' employment file, yielded nothing. He wasn't listed in the files, which had been computerized since the 1970s.²⁹

Census Reports:

The 1920 and 1930 Census reports yield no direct information on Marshall Owens. However, a Sallie Owens, possibly his mother, was listed in the 1920 Census of January 10, 1920. She was living on a farm at 526 Ninth Avenue, Birmingham City. She was 45 years old, widowed, and had been born in Georgia, as had her parents. She lived with her son-in-law, Eliot Crawford, who owned the farm. In 1920 Crawford was 31 years old, and his wife, Robie Crawford (Marshall Owens' sister), was 24. (Jessie Banks, "cousin," female, and 21 years old, was another member of the household.)³⁰ Is it possible that the nephew raised by Marshall Owens was named Crawford?

One reason for not finding Marshall Owens may be that his name was undecipherable. Another could have been that, as a traveling musician, he missed the census.

The U.S. Postal Service still gives a zip code for the address where Marshall Owens and his nephew lived. However, a letter sent to the current residents of the same address was returned.

Form SSA-5 APPLICATION FOR SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNT NUMBER. Includes fields for name (Marshall Owens), date of birth (July 4, 1892), place of birth (Tallapoosa, Alabama), and employment history (Construction Job, 1934-1944).

417-20-9283

PLEASE PRINT WITH INK OR USE TYPE WRITER

1. WORKER'S FIRST NAME: MARSHALL (None) LAST NAME: OWENS

2. FULL NAME UNDER WHICH YOU WORK, IF DIFFERENT FROM NAME SHOWN IN ITEM 1: MARSHALL OWENS 3. WORKER'S PRESENT HOME ADDRESS (STREET AND NUMBER): HAYNEVILLE (CITY): Alabama (STATE):

4. HAVE YOU EVER BEFORE HAD A SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNT NUMBER CARRY OVER? YES NO

5. AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY: 49 6. DATE OF BIRTH (MONTH) (DAY) (YEAR): July 4 1892 7. PLACE OF BIRTH (CITY) (COUNTY) (STATE): Tallapoosa Tallapoosa Alabama

8. SEX: MALE FEMALE 9. COLOR OR RACE: WHITE OTHER 10. MARRIED SINGLE WIDOWED DIVORCED 11. BUSINESS NAME OF PRESENT EMPLOYER: Lauderdale County 12. BUSINESS ADDRESS OF PRESENT EMPLOYER (STREET AND NUMBER) (CITY) (STATE): Hayneville Lauderdale Alabama

13. FATHER'S FULL NAME, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD: Tom Owens 14. MOTHER'S FULL NAME, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD: Sallie Love

15. DATE LAST FULL TIME JOB BEGAN—LAST OCCUPATION—LAST EMPLOYER (SEE INSTRUCTIONS): December 15, 1934 Construction Job 16. HOW MUCH YOU PAID (CHECK ONE) 40 cents per hour for 8 hours

17. DATE BEGAN (MONTH) (DAY) (YEAR): September 26, 1944 18. APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE (PRINT NAME) (PRINT ADDRESS): Marshall Owens

RETURN COMPLETED APPLICATION TO: OR SECURE INFORMATION ON HOW TO FILE BY APPLICATION FROM NEAREST SOCIAL SECURITY BOARD FIELD OFFICE. THE ADDRESS CAN BE OBTAINED FROM LOCAL POST OFFICE

Marshall Owens' Social Security Application

(courtesy Alex van der Tuuk)

ALABAMA

Center for Health Statistics

2366

STATE OF ALABAMA
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

123367

10
53
1007

1
1

B

04 7

J 4272

DECEASED—NAME Marshall Owens		DATE OF DEATH (MONTH, DAY, YEAR) May 1, 1974	
RACE OR COLOR Black	SEX M	AGE—LAST BIRTHDAY (YEARS, MONTHS, DAYS) 84	DATE OF BIRTH (MONTH, DAY, YEAR) 3/15/90
CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION OF DEATH Bessemer 37XX8	COUNTY OF DEATH Jefferson	HOSPITAL OR OTHER INSTITUTION—NAME (IF NOT IN EITHER, GIVE STREET AND NUMBER) Ruby Hill Nursing Home	
STATE OF BIRTH (IF NOT IN U.S.A., NAME) Georgia	CITIZEN OF WHAT COUNTRY U. S. A.	MARRIED, NEVER MARRIED, WIDOWED, DIVORCED (SPECIFY) Widowed	SURVIVING SPOUSE BY WIFE, GIVE MARRIAGE NAME None
SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER 417-26-9283	USUAL OCCUPATION (GIVE KIND OF WORK DONE DURING MOST OF WORKING LIFE, EVEN IF RETIRED) Miner	KIND OF BUSINESS OR INDUSTRY U. S. Pipe Company	
RESIDENCE—STATE Alabama	CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION Birmingham	STREET AND NUMBER 3364-31st Street, North	
FATHER—NAME Unknown	MOTHER—MAIDEN NAME Unknown		
PHYSICIAN'S NAME (IF ANY) R. Ingram	INFORMANT—NAME Mrs. Louise M. Ward		
17a ADDRESS Ruby Hill Nursing Home	17b ADDRESS 936-Center Place, S. W.		
DEATH WAS CAUSED BY (ENTER ONLY ONE CAUSE—SEE INSTRUCTIONS)		APPROXIMATE INTERVAL BETWEEN ONSET AND DEATH	
IMMEDIATE CAUSE Cardio Pulmonary Arrest		Immediate	
CONDITIONS, IF ANY, WHICH GAVE RISE TO IMMEDIATE CAUSE OR STATED THE UNDERLYING CAUSE LAST		4272	
PART II: OTHER SIGNIFICANT CONDITIONS, CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO DEATH BUT NOT RELATED TO CAUSE GIVEN IN PART I (a)			
Cerebrovascular Accident		ALTOGETHER (YES OR NO) No	IF YES WERE FINDINGS CONSIDERED IN DETERMINING CAUSE OF DEATH? Yes
ACCIDENT, SUICIDE, HOMICIDE, OR UNDETERMINED (SPECIFY)	DATE OF INJURY (MONTH, DAY, YEAR)	HOUR	HOW INJURY OCCURRED (ENTER NATURE OF INJURY IN PART I OR PART II, ITEM 1b)
INJURY AT WORK (SPECIFY YES OR NO)	PLACE OF INJURY AT HOME, FARM, STREET, FACTORY, OFFICE BLDG., ETC. (SPECIFY)	LOCATION (STREET OR R.F.D. NO., CITY OR TOWN, STATE)	
CERTIFICATION—PHYSICIAN	MONTH DAY YEAR	AND LAST NAME	DECEASED NOT IDENTIFIED (YES OR NO)
I ATTENDED THE DECEASED FROM	5 24 73	74	No
CERTIFICATION OBSOLETE ON HEALTH OFFICER'S SIGNATURE (TYPE OR PRINT)	HOUR OF DEATH	THE DECEASED WAS PRONOUNCED DEAD	DATE (MONTH, DAY, YEAR)
R. Ingram, M.D.		1974	5 15 74
PLACE OF DEATH (TYPE OR PRINT)	STREET OR R.F.D. NO.	CITY OR TOWN	STATE
University Hospital	Birmingham	Alabama	35273
BURIAL—CREATION, REMOVAL (SPECIFY)	CEMETERY OR CREMATORY—NAME	LOCATION	STATE
Burial	Woodlawn	Birmingham, Alabama	
DATE (MONTH, DAY, YEAR)	FUNERAL HOME—NAME AND ADDRESS	STREET OR R.F.D. NO., CITY OR TOWN, STATE, ZIP	
5/15/74	Davenport-Harris	1110-7th Avenue, N., Birmingham, Ala.	
HEALTH OFFICER'S SIGNATURE	REGISTERAR—SIGNATURE	DATE RECEIVED BY LOCAL REGISTRAR	
William Clayton	William A. Harrell	MAY - 7 1974	

I, Dorothy S. Harshbarger, State Registrar of Health Statistics, certify this is a true and exact copy of the original certificate filed in the Center for Health Statistics, State of Alabama, Department of Public Health, Montgomery, Alabama, and have caused the official seal of the Center for Health Statistics to be affixed. 2002-149-400-7

Dorothy S. Harshbarger
Dorothy S. Harshbarger, State Registrar

February 22, 2002

Marshall Owens died May 1, 1974
(courtesy Alex van der Tuuk)



(Grafton, Wisconsin, November, 1931—Three known copies?)

Ben Covington alias Ben Curry?

According to Gayle Dean Wardlow, Ben Curry was originally from the town of Arcadia in northern Louisiana.³¹ Sometime in the mid-1920s, he moved to Birmingham, Alabama. The 1900 Louisiana Census listed a "Benjamin Curry," and the 1910 Alamama Census also listed a "Ben Curry."

It's possible that Curry was drafted during World War I. Only one African-American Ben Curry was listed in the World War I Civilian Draft Registration

file. The file listed his birth date as April 19, 1890 and birth place as Velma, Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

In addition to the "harp" [harmonica], Curry played an instrument called the "mandolin-banjo." His recording output in *Blues and Gospel Records*, Fourth Edition (1997) indicates that Ben Curry, Blind (Bogus) Ben Covington, and Memphis Ben are the same person. Aural evidence shows the similarity of recorded material and the same kinds of

accompaniment. Instruments for the three artists are listed as banjo/mandolin, possibly own harp, harp/banjo, and guitar/harp. Both Paramount 12693 and its ad in the December 15, 1928 *Chicago Defender* list the accompaniment for Bogus Ben Covington as guitar and harmonica.³²

In addition to the similarity of instruments, the following recorded titles overlap:

BEN CURRY
Hot Dog
 (Paramount 13122)
Boodle de Bum Bum
 (Paramount 13118)

BEN COVINGTON
Adam And Eve In The Garden
 (Paramount 12693)
Boodle-De-Bum Blues
 (Brunswick 7121)

MEMPHIS BEN
Adam And Eve In The Garden
Of Eden (unissued Vocalion)
Hot Dog (unissued Vocalion)

In personal letters to this author, Kip Lornell, David Evans, and others, were inclined to agree that Curry, Covington, and Memphis Ben were the same person.

Paul Oliver, in his *Songsters and Saints*,³³ mentioned that Covington was "almost certainly the Ben Curry who recorded a less well-known version of Speckled Red's 'The Dirty Dozen.'" According to Oliver, Ben Covington/Curry performed, like Speckled Red, at the Red Rose Minstrel Show.

"He was 'bogus' blind!"

Mississippi-based artist Big Joe Williams, remembered a musician named Ben Covington who was "bogus" blind, i.e. he was pretending to be blind "to earn more money" while playing on the streets. Gayle Dean Wardlow even stated that he may have worn sunglasses to strengthen this idea.³⁴ Big Joe Williams claimed Covington was from Mississippi.³⁵ As late as 1933, Williams played with Covington at the Century of Progress Expo in Chicago.³⁶

*Editor's Note: Paramount and the Grafton Hotel apparently (?) made a notable exception. According to a Son House interview by Steve Calt/Nick Perls (78 *Quarterly* No. 1, p. 61) House and Louise Johnson stayed in one room at the Grafton Hotel. Charley Patton and Willie Brown also stayed there, but in separate rooms.

If Covington/Curry was "playing on the streets" in Mississippi, it seems he also did a lot of traveling. He recorded for Paramount in Chicago circa September, 1928 as Bogus Ben Covington,³⁷ and if he is indeed Memphis Ben, he made another session for Vocalion in Memphis on November 23, 1928, producing only two titles, as trial recordings.³⁸

The Memphis Ben title "Hot Dog" probably remained unissued because the flip side ("Adam And Eve In The Garden," Paramount 12693) had already been recorded, and couldn't be issued by Vocalion, because of copyright infringement. This left only one track with no flip side. The other [minstrel] act recorded by Vocalion in Memphis, Kighthouse and Jaybird (whose real name was Thomas Jones) were from Clarksdale, Mississippi.³⁹ Is it possible that Ben Covington was discovered in Clarksdale and sent up for a recording session in Memphis—only two months after he returned from his Paramount recording session in Chicago?

The name, "Memphis Ben," may have been a convenient disguise for Covington/Curry (if he recorded for Vocalion, he would have broken his Paramount contract). The Memphis Ben alias may also have come from Harry Charles, the Birmingham talent scout who sometimes hid blues singers under aliases (in order to get them recorded by other record companies). Charles would then cash in on them twice or more. A Charles' protege, James (Bo Weevil) Jackson, originally recorded for Paramount in 1926, then for Vocalion as "Sam Butler."⁴⁰

In October, 1929, Covington/Curry recorded another session in Chicago for Brunswick (affiliated with Vocalion)⁴¹ as "Blind Ben Covington."

In the Autumn of 1931, Curry was

(re-)discovered, probably by Paramount executive Henry Stephany, when he and his wife had made several trips to Birmingham.⁴² Curry was invited to come to Grafton to make records for Paramount. During this session, he recorded with Marshall Owens.

By then, both musicians were living in the Birmingham area. According to Wardlow, Curry moved to Birmingham in the mid-1920s, although no entries were found in the Birmingham city directories.

Marshall Owens had settled in Jefferson County,⁴³ west of Birmingham as early as World War I (around 1917). The two men may have met in Birmingham. Quite a few musicians were known to have lived in this area. According to Bob Eagle, "There is evidence of a strong blues piano tradition in Alabama. At first sight the obvious music center of the State is Jefferson County including the county seat of Birmingham and the mining center of Bessemer. Perhaps, because of the concentration of coal mining, the music of the area emphasized singing and particularly group singing. The populace leaned heavily towards religious music, and Birmingham was an early center for quartet singing groups."⁴⁴

According to Wardlow, Curry knew of another artist whom he had played with in Monroe and other northern Louisiana towns. This blues singer was issued on Paramount as "King Solomon Hill," an artist identified as Joe Holmes. That November, The Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham also made the trip to Paramount's recording studio in Grafton, Wisconsin.

(Thanks to Bob Eagle, David Evans, Don Kent, and Paul Swinton (May 24, 2003).

BEST SELLERS

- 13119**—Sleep On Mother and I'm Leaning On The Lord...Blue Jay Singers.... 50c
13118—Boodle De Bum Bum and Fat Mouth Blues—Vocal-Inst. Acc...Ben Curry 50c
13064—I Don't Want It Now & I'm Gonna Moochy—Voc. Duet...Lewis-Hannah 50c
13125—My Buddy Blind Lemon and Times Has Done Got Hard...Solomon Hill. 50c
13104—Where Did You Stay Last Night and Come On In—Voc...Harum Scarums 50c
13122—The Laffing Rag and Hot Dog—Voc. Mand.-Banjo-Harp Acc...B. Curry... 50c
13116—Whoopee Blues and Down On My Bended Knee...King Solomon Hill (Blind Lemon's Buddy)..... 50c



“A second best to the Patton, House, Brown, Johnson session was the one that included King Solomon Hill, Owens, Curry, and the Famous Blues Jay Singers of Birmingham...”





"A second best..."



13129—THE GONE DEAD TRAIN—Vocal
 TELL ME BABY—with Guitar Acc.
 Sung by King Solomon Hill, Blind Lemons Buddy 65c

From the July, 1934 F.W. Boerner Co. catalog
 (courtesy Alex van der Tuuk)

NOTES:

- 1 Reissued on Document DOCD 5036, DOCD 5165, DOCD 5166 and DOCD 5538 respectively.
- 2 For a full report on Hill's identification see: *Chasin' That Devil Music* (1998) by Gayle Dean Wardlow, pp. 2-7 and pp. 208 -218. See also: *The King Solomon Hill Fiasco* by David Evans, *Blues World* No. 21 (October, 1968), pp. 17-20
- 3 *Living Blues*, Issue 26 March-April 1976): Obituaries: Marshall Owens, page 7
- 4 See: www.bluesworld.com/78Q10.html: *Marshall Owens in Alabama—and on Paramount.*
- 5 Telephone conversation with Don Kent, May 5, 2002
- 6 See *Living Blues* issue 26, page 9
- 7 Telephone conversation with Don Kent, May 5, 2002
- 8 *Ibid*
- 9 *Ibid*
- 10 Interview with Alfred Schultz, August 2, 1969. Conducted by Gayle Dean Wardlow
- 11 Email from Konrad Nowakowski, February 4, 2003
- 12 *Ibid*
- 13 Jeff Cole and Nick Carter: *Long Ago, Our Own House Of Blues.* From *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.* www.jsonline.com, May 9, 2002. Discography: Pm 13125 - A: My Buddy Blind Papa Lemon (L-1 256-2); B: Times Has Done Got Hard (L-1255-2)
- 14 See: www.
- 15 Alex van der Tuuk: (P)redating Grafton's L-Matrix Series, *VJM* issue No. 127, pp. 4 - 8 (Autumn 2002.)
- 16 *Blues And Gospel Records*, Fourth Edition, page 695
- 17 Telephone conversation with Don Kent, May 5, 2002
- 18 Email from David Evans, May 17, 2003
- 19 Email from Paul Swinton, May 22, 2003
- 20 Guido van Rijn: *Roosevelt's Blues, African-American Blues And Gospel Songs On FDR*, page 44 a.o.
- 21 Email from Bob Eagle, October 30, 2002
- 22 Max E. Vreedc: *Paramount 12000/13000 Series*, Storyville Publications, 1971
- 23 Telephone conversation with Don Kent, May 5, 2002
- 24 Letter from Department of Public Health, State of Alabama, July 24, 2002

- 25 The following Birmingham, AL, city directories were checked for a listing of Marshall Owens: 1923, 1932, 1941, 1950, 1961 and 1968. Owens was not listed in one of these directories. Letter from Birmingham Public Library, November 20, 2002
- 26 In *Living Blues* issue 26, page 9, Don Kent wrote that this occurred in the late 1960s. In my telephone conversation of May 5, 2002 and subsequent calls with Don he assured me it happened in the late 1950s since the nephew remembered that Owens had been living in the nursing home for some considerable time, when interviewed in 1975
- 27 Telephone conversation with Don Kent, May 5, 2002
- 28 *Ibid*
- 29 Letter from Gail R. Stewart, HRIS Manager for United States Pipe and Foundry Company, January 3, 2003
- 30 Email from Bob Eagle, January 30, 2003
- 31 Wardlow: *Chasin' That Devil Music*, page 212; personal letter from Gayle Dean Wardlow, May 29, 2001
- 32 Max E. Vreedc: *Paramount 12000/13000 series*, Storyville Publications, 1971
- 33 *Songsters & Saints, Vocal Traditions On Race Records* (1984.), Page 122
- 34 Personal letter from Gayle Dean Wardlow, May 29, 2001
- 35 *Blues World* 23, page 10 (1968)
- 36 *Ibid*
- 37 *Blues And Gospel Records*, Fourth Edition (1997), page 180
- 38 *Ibid*: page 611
- 39 Email from David Evans, November 13, 2001
- 40 Stephen Calt and Gayle Dean Wardlow: *Paramount Part 4 [The Advent Of Arthur Laibby]*, 78 *Quarterly* No. 6, pages 11 and 13 (1991)
- 41 *Blues And Gospel Records*, Fourth Edition, page 180
- 42 Wardlow: *Chasin' That Devil Music*, page 212
- 43 In Owens' obituary in *Living Blues* Issue 26, page 9, Don Kent wrote that by World War I he was already settled in Walker County, west of Birmingham. In my telephone conversation with Don in 2002, he recalled Owens had settled in Jefferson County.
- 44 Robert Eagle: *Encyclopedia Of Blues & Gospel, Alabama* on www.document-records.co.uk/enclopaediaalabama2.htm

Interested in new information about Alabama's pioneer blues singers?...

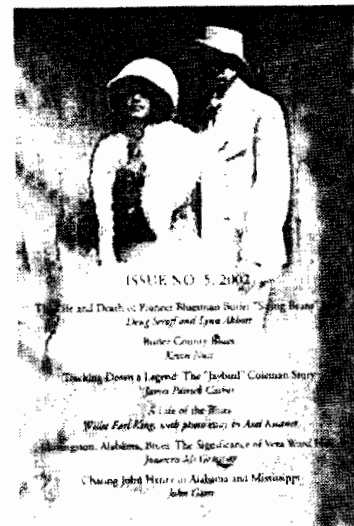
78 Quarterly suggests Tributaries

Issue No. 5, 2002

141 pages include illustrated articles on Butler "String Beans" May, Ed Bell, "Jaybird" Coleman, and Vera Ward Hall.
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Tributaries

Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association



where he worked as a miner for the U.S. Pipe Company for most of his working life. At that time Owens lived at 3364 31st Street, North.²⁵

In the late 1950s Owens was still playing guitar until a "cerebrovascular accident" incapacitated him completely.²⁶ According to his nephew, he remained fairly active and lucid up to that point. His nephew put him in a nursing home, the Ruby Hill Nursing Home, just outside of Bessemer. Owens was becoming more senile as the years progressed.²⁷ Owens' senility probably led to less frequent visits from his nephew. This may have been the reason the nephew didn't know Owens had died in 1974. It would also explain why the nephew's name isn't listed on the death certificate.

Owens dead at 84!

From December 21, 1973 until his death on May 1, 1974, Owens was under the care of a Dr. R. Ingram, who was treating him (possibly for a heart condition) at the Ruby Hill Nursing Home. The physician visited him for the last time on

April 28. Owens died on May 1, 1974 at 1:35 A.M.. The immediate cause of death was listed as Cardio-Pulmonary Arrest. No autopsy was done.

Marshall Owens was buried on May 5, 1974 at Woodlawn Cemetary, 1110 Seventh Avenue, North, in Birmingham.

There was no information on Mrs. Louise M. Ward, the Death Certificate informant. When Don Kent visited Marshall Owens' nephew, he asked if there were any photographs. "The nephew said there had been some, but they were all thrown away for one reason or another. He didn't have any on hand. In fact, he didnt even let me in the house, and I sort of interviewed him on the stoop. Amenable, but he wasn't like, hospitable. He seemed a little wary."²⁸

Currently, the Ruby Hill Nursing home is unlisted. This makes it problematic in trying to trace Owens' nephew (if he's still alive!). When I contacted the U.S. Pipe Company's main plant for Owens' employment file, yielded nothing. He wasn't listed in the files, which had been computerized since the 1970s.²⁹

Census Reports:

The 1920 and 1930 Census reports yield no direct information on Marshall Owens. However, a Sallie Owens, possibly his mother, was listed in the 1920 Census of January 10, 1920. She was living on a farm at 526 Ninth Avenue, Birmingham City. She was 45 years old, widowed, and had been born in Georgia, as had her parents. She lived with her son-in-law, Eliot Crawford, who owned the farm. In 1920 Crawford was 31 years old, and his wife, Robie Crawford (Marshall Owens' sister), was 24. (Jessie Banks, "cousin," female, and 21 years old, was another member of the household.)³⁰ Is it possible that the nephew raised by Marshall Owens was named Crawford?

One reason for not finding Marshall Owens may be that his name was undecipherable. Another could have been that, as a traveling musician, he missed the census.

The U.S. Postal Service still gives a zip code for the address where Marshall Owens and his nephew lived. However, a letter sent to the current residents of the same address was returned.

APPLICATION FOR SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNT NUMBER

REQUIRED UNDER THE FEDERAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS ACT

READ INSTRUCTIONS ON BACK BEFORE FILLING IN FORM

417-20-9283

EACH ITEM SHOULD BE FILLED IN. IF THE INFORMATION CALLED FOR IS ANY OTHER IS NOT KNOWN, WRITE "UNKNOWN" DO NOT WRITE IN THE ABOVE SPACE

PLEASE PRINT WITH INK OR USE TYPE WRITER

1. MARSHALL (None) OWENS 520
WORKER'S FIRST NAME MIDDLE NAME OF YOUR HOME OR HOME PHONE, DIAL A LINE LAST NAME

2. MARSHALL OWENS 3. HAYNEVILLE Alabama
FULL NAME UNDER WHICH YOU WORK, IF DIFFERENT FROM NAME SHOWN IN ITEM 1 WORKER'S PRESENT HOME ADDRESS (STREET AND NUMBER) (CITY) (STATE)

4. HAVE YOU EVER BEFORE HAD A SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNT NUMBER CARRY NO YES

5. 49 6. July 4 1892 7. Talbot Talbot Georgia
AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY DATE OF BIRTH (MONTH) (YEAR) (CITY) (STATE) (COUNTY) PLACE OF BIRTH (CITY) (STATE)

8. SEX: MALE FEMALE 9. COLOR OR RACE: WHITE OTHER 10. MARRIED SINGLE WIDOWED DIVORCED
(CHECK ONE) (CHECK ONE) (CHECK ONE) (CHECK ONE)

11. Lawrence County 12. Hayneville Lawrence Ala
WORKER'S HOME OF PRESENT EMPLOYER ADDRESS AND NUMBER (CITY) (STATE)

13. Tom Owens 14. Sallie Love
FATHER'S FULL NAME, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD MOTHER'S FULL NAME BEFORE MARRIAGE, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD

15. December 15, 1934 Construction Job 16. 40 cents per hour for 8 hours
DATE LAST FULL TIME JOB BEGAN—LAST OCCUPATION—LAST EMPLOYER (SEE INSTRUCTIONS) WEEKLY (EXAMPLE: DAILY WAGE, "SALAR," "QUARTERLY," "PERIODIC")

17. September 26, 1944 18. Marshall Owens
DATE BEGAN APPLICANT'S EMPLOYER (WORK NAME) (JOB TITLE) (LAST NAME)

RETURN COMPLETED APPLICATION TO: OR SECURE INFORMATION ON HOW TO FILE BY APPLICATION FROM NEAREST SOCIAL SECURITY BOARD FIELD OFFICE. THE ADDRESS CAN BE OBTAINED FROM LOCAL POST OFFICE

Marshall Owens' Social Security Application

(courtesy Alex van der Tuuk)