The Land Where the Blues Began

Alan Lomax

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Chapter 10

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Blues in the Mississippi Night

I spent a lot of time with Big Bill Broonzy when he lived in Chicago in a rented single room lit by a single light bulb hanging at the end of a fly-specked wire. I watched as he wrote lyrics for his next blues session with a stub pencil on a school tablet. Bill seemed to me as wise as he was big, and warm and talented. He introduced me to Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson. Over a midnight bottle of bourbon, I learned that Memphis and Bill had grown up in the Arkansas River bottoms, and I surprised them by singing some snatches of Arkansas prison work songs that I knew. Memphis looked at me quizzically and then began to chuckle. Big Bill winked, and although I never asked, I believe they thought that perhaps I had served time in the Arkansas pen, as apparently they had. There was no other way I could have heard these prison tunes. At any rate, the atmosphere warmed, and we talked of many things as the bottle went round, and time passed pleasantly and we all decided they should do a Chicago blues concert in the "Midnight Special" series I was then producing at Town Hall in New York.

When they came to New York, they slept over at my place in the Village in order to save hotel money. They entertained my daughter Anna and sampled our Southern cooking. That night in 1946 the trio tore down the house at Town Hall, discovering that their Delta music was appreciated by an audience they had never known about. The moment seemed right for a productive recording session. They were eager for it. I took them to Decca, where we could have a whole studio to ourselves that Sunday. We had a couple of drinks.

I put my little one-celled Presto disc recorders on the floor, and I sat at their feet, flipping the discs, as they reminisced.[1] There was only one microphone. Memphis began with a song of his own:

You got to cry a little, die a little . . .

and when the last golden chords died away, I said, "Listen, you all have lived with the blues all your life, but nobody up North here understands where they come from. Tell me what the blues are all about."

That was about the last thing that I said for two hours. My Chicago friends began a conversation with each other that grew more intense as the afternoon wore on. I think that they really forgot that I was there as they talked, played, and sang to each other. It was almost as if the Mississippi night had closed in around them while they reminisced, creating a sort of one-act play about the strange and tragic events of Delta life. In doing so, they recapitulated the whole substance of this book.

Big Bill, who was older than the others, took a Socratic role, gently drawing his young friends into deeper and deeper levels of the drama. Memphis Slim, then one of the finest blues pianists in the world, who bore a mood of erotic and comradely pleasure everywhere he went, offered humorous counterpoint to Bill's graver observations. Sonny Boy, with all his madcap gifts, was a little simple, and his two friends would gently kid him, so that he, in great delight, could take the comic role in the play.

"The thing about the blues is," Big Bill said, his voice ringing out with authority, "it didn't start in the North—in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, wha'soever it is—it didn't start in the East, neither in the North—it started in the South, from what I'm thinking."

"Blues started from slavery," Memphis muttered, half to himself.

"And the thing that has come to a showdown, that we really want to know why, and how come, a man in the South *have* the blues," Bill went on. "I worked on levee camps, extra gangs, road camps and rock camps and rock quarries and every place, and I hear guys singin *uh-hmmmm* this and *mmmmm* that, and I want to get the thing plainly that the blues is something that's from the heart—I know that, and whensoever you hear fellows singing the blues—I always believed it was a really heart thing, from his heart, you know, and it was expressing his feeling about *how* he felt to the people.

"I've known guys that wanted to cuss out the boss and was afraid to go up

to his face and tell him what he wanted to tell him, and I've heard them sing those things—sing words, you know, back to the boss—say things to the mule, make like the mule stepped on his foot—say, 'Get off my foot, goddam it!' and he meant he was talking to the boss. 'You son-of-a-bitch,' he say, 'stay off my foot!' and such things as that."

"Yeah, blues is kind of a revenge," Memphis broke in. "You know you wanta say something, you wanta signifyin like—that's the blues. We all have had a hard time in life, and things we couldn't say or do, so we sing it."

"How do you sing a thing like that?" Bill asked.

"Well, like a friend of mines was down working on the railroad, and he sang some songs for me, a little number called

Oh, ratty, ratty section,
Oh, ratty, ratty crew.
Well, the cap'n gettin ratty, ratty boys,
You know I'm gonna rat some too.

He couldn't speak up to the cap'n and the boss, but he still had to work, so it give him the blues, so he sang it—he was signifying and getting his revenge through songs."

"And he didn't quit because he didn't know where he gonna find his next job," Bill added.

"Probably had one of those jobs you *couldn't* quit," Memphis chuckled.

"Man, how they gonna hold you?" from Sonny Boy, querulously.

"They hold you like this, Sonny Boy. They didn't have no payday on them jobs. They give you an allowance in the commissary store for you and your woman. You draw on that allowance, so much a week, and after it was up, that's all you got, see? Maybe sometimes you didn't get no pay at all."

"Yeah," Memphis joined in. "Most of us didn't know how to read and write and figure and so they charged us what they wants. They charged us twenty-five dollars for a side of side meat. And you gonna stay there till you paid for that meat, maybe gettin twenty-five cents a day wages. When you take a notion to leave, they tell you, 'Well, you owe us four hundred dollars.' "

Big Bill took up the story. "Suppose you be working a team of mules, and one of them gets his leg broke and you have to kill him—that's your mule! Yessir, that dead mule is one you bought and you gonna work right on that job till you pay for him or slip off some way."

"And if you say anything about it," Memphis said seriously, "you might go just like the mule. All odds are against you, even your own people."

"That's right," agreed Bill. "The white man don't all the time do those things. It's some of your own people at times will do those dirty deeds because they're told to do them, and they do what they're told."

Treat a group of people as if they had no right to dignity, allow these people no security, make them bend their knees and bow their heads, and some of them will conform to slavery in their own souls. Perhaps these so-called Uncle Toms are the most grievous result of the slavery system.

Bill interrupted my reflections: "Looky here, Memphis. Did you ever work for the Loran brothers?"

"You mean those guys that built all these levees up and down the river from Memphis? Sho, man, I've worked for the bigges part of the Loran family—Mister Isum Loran, Mister Bill Loran, Mister Charley Loran—all them. I think them Lorans are something like the Rockefeller family. When a kid is born, *he* Loran junior. They got Loran the second, Loran the third, Loran the fourth. They always been and they is still—Loran brothers—some of them big businessmens in towns, some of them running extry gangs and levee camps and road camps. And *they* were peoples wouldn't allow a man to quit unless they got tired of him and drove him away."[2]

"That's right," Memphis chuckled. "And remember how the boys used to sing:

I axed Mister Charley
What time of day,
He looked at me,
Threw his watch away.

All the way from the Brazos bottoms of Texas to the tidewater country of Virginia I had heard black muleskinners chant their complaint against Mister Charley, but the score of singers all disagreed about his identity. I grinned with excitement. Maybe I had at last discovered the identity of my elusive Mister Charley.

I asked my second question of the evening. "Who is this 'Mister Charley'?"

"Mister Charley Loran," Bill immediately responded.

"What sort of man is he?" I asked.

"Well," Memphis drawled, "now I couldn't hardly describe him to you. You know, it's hard for a colored man to talk like a white man anyhow."

(Memphis was talking for my benefit now. He had been reminded there was a white man listening there. He began to rib me gently.) "Mister Charley was one of them *real* Southerners; had a voice that would scare you to death whenever he'd come out with all that crap of his. Always in his shirtsleeves, I don't care how early in the mornin and how cold it was."

"Night or day." Big Bill began to chuckle with him. "Didn't make no difference to Mister Charley what time it was."

"Don't care how early he'd get up, you gonna get up, too. He'd holler:

Big bell call you, little bell warn you,
If you don't come now, I'm gonna break in on you.

And he *meant* it."

"Sho he did," laughed Big Bill. "He the man originated the old-time eight-hour shift down here. Know what I mean? Eight hours in the morning and eight more in the afternoon."

Sonny Boy kept adding eight to eight and getting sixteen and going off into peal after peal of high, whinnying laughter. In this shared laughter I felt the three had again accepted me. I asked another question.

"'I'd always heard of this Mister Charley in the song as 'the Mercy Man.' Is *he* the same as Charley Loran?"

"Naw, man, that's Mister Charley *Houlin*, the best friend we ever had down in this part of the country, really a friend to our people. He was the man we all run to when somebody mistreated us," Big Bill told me.

"Otherwise known as the Mercy Man," Memphis added. "I remember an incident happened in Hughes, Arkansas. They had a fellow there named Charley Holan that were running a honky-tonk."

"That's right," Bill put in. "A barrelhouse, they call it."

"He had a lot of property there, this colored feller name Holan. So they hired a sheriff there, and-a, so this sheriff were living in one of Charley Holan's houses. And he wouldn't pay Charley no rent, he were just staying there; and so every time that Charley would ask him for some rent, he'd whip Charley Holan. So *he* happened to be, as they say, one of Charley Houlin's Negroes. So, Charley Holan finally got up enough nerve to go tell Charley Houlin; so that Charley telled the police, say, 'Saturday evening at one o'clock, meet, I'm killing you or you kill me.' And I mean, that's no joke, that's what happened. So he met him that evening and he told him, say, 'Well, I came to kill you—you been messing with one of my Negroes.' So the police went to get his

pistol, and Charley shot him through the heart. So they pulled him over out the street, and let the honky-tonk roll on . . ." Softly, seeing it, wondering about it, he repeated, "Yeah, man, let the old honky-tonk roll *right* on."

"Toughest place I ever seen," said Big Bill, "were some of them honky-tonks in Charley Loran's camps. Negroes all be in there gamblin, you know, and some of them short guys couldn't quite reach up to the crap table—and I've seed them pull a *dead* man up there and stand on him."

"Yeah, stand right on him," said Memphis.

Big Bill had more to tell. "Pull that dead man up there, and stand on him and still keep shooting dice, see. And I've heard them come around and say, 'If you boys keep yourselves out of the grave, I'll keep you outa jail.' "

"That's right," said Memphis. "And I've heard them say, 'If you kill a nigger, I'll hire another one. If you kill a mule, I'll buy another one.' On the levee camps they used to say, when fellers would be so tired from carrying logs or something like that, or clearing new ground, he say, 'Burn out, burn up. Fall out, fall dead.' Yeah, just keep rolling, that was the best you could do. Work yourself to death or either you was a good man."

"Main thing about it is that some of those people down there didn't think a Negro ever get tired!" Big Bill's ordinarily quiet voice broke with a sound that was half sob, half growl. "They'd work him—work him till he couldn't work, see! You couldn't *tell* um you was tired."

"Why couldn't you?" I asked.

"They'd crack you cross the head with a stick or maybe kill you. One of those things. You just had to keep on workin whether you was tired or not. From what they call 'can to can't.' That mean you start to work when you just can see, early in the mornin, and work right on till you can't see no more at night."

"Only man ever helped us about our work was Charley Houlin, the Mercy Man," said Memphis. "He used to come out and say, 'Those fellows are tired; give um some rest.' Ain't he the man, Bill, cut them sixteen hours a day down to eight?"

"Right in this section he was," Bill replied.

"How did he do it?" I asked.

"Why, he and his son, Little Charley, just didn't like the way things was going on, so they just come in and taken over, that's all. Otherwise they was the baddest men down through this part of the country. Both of them was ex-cowboys from Texas and sharpshooters. Could shoot like nobody's business. So after they taken over, that made it a lot better. And it's still better today."

"You mean the people were just scared of Old Man Houlin and his boy?" I asked.

"That's right," Memphis said. "I'll tell you how bad they was scared. You know, they passed a law in Arkansas—no hitchhiking. I was trying to get a ride to Little Rock, and so a feller by the name of Mister Cut, he was the baddest feller down from the latter part of Arkansas."

"Yeah, he is, too," added Bill.

"So he says," Memphis went on, " 'What are you doing hitchhiking here, feller, er, boy?' I say, 'I am trying to get home to work.' He say, 'Where you work at? Who you work for?' I say"—Memphis imitated the mild and insinuating way he made his reply—" 'I work in Hughes for Mister Charley Houlin.' You know what he told me? He say, 'Come on, I'll take you there.' "

Sonny Boy, Big Bill, and Memphis threw back their heads and laughed, laughed quietly and long, as if they shared some old joke, burdened with irony, but bearable out of long acquaintance.

"Any other time, or if you had been with any other man, or if you don't be working, you'd have got a whipping, or went to jail or to the levee, went to the farm . . ."

"Went on the farm and work for no pay," said Bill.

"That's right," Memphis went on, "but since I was working for Mister Charley, he taken me to Mister Charley."

"Yeah, he was even scared to bother you because you was one of his men."

"Mister Cut take me in his car," said Memphis. "Even gave me a drink!"

Bill, shaking his head in wonder, chuckled, "They'll do that, too."

"You know, Memphis," Big Bill continued, "you and I worked in all kinds of camps—levee camps, road camps, rock quarries, and all—but what I want to get at is, how we lived in those places? You know, the way we lived in those tents and things like that, and the food we had to eat was scrap food from what other people had refused—old bags of beans and stuff they couldn't sell."

Memphis, beginning to howl with laughter over the old and painful joke he recalled, interrupted, "They take all that stuff and they put it in a pot, and they had a name for it in the camp I was in—'La-la-lu. If I don't like it, he do.' But you like it, you like it."

"Yeah, that right," Bill agreed. "I know what you mean."

Big Bill continued, forcing us to savor the dirt, see the hoggish way the men had to live. "They have those big truck patches they call um down there, truck gardens, and they just pull up greens by the sackful, you know, and take um to the lake or creek, sort of shake um off in the water and throw um in the pot.

In one of them fifty-two-gallon pots, you know, and cook all the stalks and the roots—"

Memphis, beginning to laugh his big laugh again, broke in. "And if you found a worm in your greens and say, 'Captain, I found a worm here,' he'd say, 'What the hell do you expect for nothin?"

Big Bill and Sonny Boy burst out in great yells of laughter, as Memphis hurried on to top his own story: "And then some feller over 'long table says, 'Gimme that piece of meat!' "

"Yeah, I've heard that," Big Bill gasped out between the gusts of laughter that were shaking his whole body. Sonny Boy couldn't sit still any longer; his laughter was riding him too hard. He went staggering around the studio room, beating his arms in the air.

When we had recovered from this healing laughter, Memphis added thoughtfully, "Those guys seemed to get a kick out of the whole thing."

"Did you ever see those guys they called 'table walkers'?" Bill asked.

"Yeah, many times," said Memphis.

"He get up from way down the other end of the table and walk right down through the table and pick up what you got."

"Those guys," Memphis said respectfully, "those guys, they were what you call tough people; they know they get a whippin."

"Pull that .45 and walk the table," Bill remembered.

"Yeah, he knew he gonna get a whippin," Memphis said. "He pull that .45 on us, an when the white man comes, the white man whip him with his .45 right there on him. The white man wouldn't have no gun or anything. He just come and say, 'Lay down there, feller, I'm gonna whip you.' " Memphis spoke quietly, with bitter, weary irony. "So this tough man would kick the gun out of his scabbard and give him a whippin." There was a pause. We could all see the big black figure cowering on the earth and the white man standing over him with a stick, beating him as he might a chicken-killing hound. After a moment, almost in a whisper, Memphis continued, "After this table walker get his whippin, he'd pick up that big pistol he toted and go on back to work."

Well, you kicked and stomped and beat me,
And you called that fun, and you called that fun.

If I catch you in my hometown,
Gonna make you run, gonna make you run.

"Yeah," Bill said. "Then maybe this guy that took the beating would come out there on the job and kill one of his buddies, kill one of us. That happens. I've seen that many times."

"In the meantime," Memphis added, "if you were a good worker, you could kill anybody down there, so long as he's colored. You could kill anybody, go anywhere."

"You mean"—Big Bill rapped this out—"you could kill anybody down there as long as you kill a *Negro*!"

"Any Negro." Memphis's voice was flat and painstakingly logical, as if he were reading the rules out of a book. "If you could work better than him. Don't kill a good worker—then you were sorry. If you did, you go to the penitentiary."

Stagolee, he went a-walkin in that red-hot broiling sun.
He said, "Bring me my big pistol, I wants my forty-one."

They were both entertainers. They had made their way safely and even pleasantly through their violent world, their guitars slung around their necks like talismans. Wearing these talismans, they had entered into all the secret places of this land, had moved safely through its most dangerous jungles, past all its killers, who, seeing their talismans, had smiled upon them. They lived the magic life of fools. (Remember the hard, drawling voice: "I got a nigger on my place that can keep you laughin all day. I don't know where he gets all the stories he tells and them songs of his. Reckon he makes them up, nigger-like. And sing! Sing like a mockinbird. You ought to hear him. You'd split your sides.") Now these buffoons with their clear artist's vision were making a picture of their world, a terrifying picture of a place in which they were perfectly at home.

"You know, Bill," said Memphis, "we had a few Negroes down there that wasn't afraid of white peoples and talk back to them. They called those people crazy."

"Crazy people, yeah," said Bill. "I wonder why did they call them crazy, because they speeak up for their rights? I had an uncle like that and they hung him. They hung him down there because they say he was crazy and might *ruin* the other Negroes. See, that is why they hung him, because he was a man that if he worked, he wanted pay; and he could figure as good as the white man,

and he had a good education better than some of the white people down there. Lot of them would come to him for advice."

"The white people there were about as dumb as we were," Memphis broke in.

Big Bill went on. "I remember one time my auntie had a baby boy; he was about two or three years old. The white man came up there one day and he told him, he says, 'Say, Gerry,' he says, 'I want you to get that woman out there and put her to work.' Says, 'There's no woman here sits up and don't work, set up and in the shade, but Miz Anne.' And my uncle say, 'Well, who is Miz Anne?' He says, 'Er, Miz Anne is my wife.' My uncle say, 'Well, I'm sorry, mister, but my wife is named Anne, too, and she sit up in the shade.' Say, 'She don't come out.' The man say, 'No nigger sits up there without working.' My uncle look at him. 'Well, that's one Miz Anne is a *Negro* and she ain't going to work in the field.' And he jumps off his horse. Well, my uncle whipped him, and run his horse on away, and then beat him up and run him away from there." Bill went on in a flat and weary voice to finish his story. "So, the white man went to town and got a gang and come out there after him that night, and he shot all four, five of them until they finally caught him."

"And hung him," muttered Memphis.

"Fifty or sixty of them come out there and got him and killed him." Bill began to speak with mounting rage: "That was on account of he was protecting his own wife, because he didn't want his wife to work out on the plantation when she had a baby there at the house to take care of and she was expecting another one pretty soon."

"I've seed this happen," Bill went on, "in the South, that one white boy down there was liking the same girl that this colored boy was liking, and he told this colored boy not to marry this colored girl because he wanted her for hisself, and the boy told him that he loved her and he was going to marry her. He say, 'Well, you can't get no license here.' So the boy run off, him and the girl, and went off to another town and they got married and they come back there and the man asked them was he really married to her. And he said, 'Yes.' So the girl figured that if she show him the license he would leave her go, and so she showed him the license; then they went and killed his daddy and they killed her. Then they killed his mother and then one of his brothers, he went out to try to protect them, and they killed him so they killed twelve in that one family. That was in 1913. The boy was named Belcher, that's the family got killed. That was at a place called Langdale, Arkansas, way out in the woods from Goulds, Arkansas."

Without any more feeling than one would recall a storm or a flood or any other past disaster, Memphis commented, "Yeah, I heard of that, heard all about it."

"It was no protection at all that the poor people got in place like that back in those days," Bill went on with calm anger. "You try to fight back, then it's not just you they're gonna get. It's anybody in your family. Just like if I got three brothers; I do something and they can't catch me, they catch the other brothers."

"Anybody in the family," added Memphis.

"*You* might do something and get away and run off, but why do somethin or other and get your whole family killed? You know what I mean?"

"I know it!"

"That's what they got on you. And if they got a girl in the family that they like, you just want to let him have her, because if you don't, he'll be liable to do something, you know, so outrageous, because when they see a Negro woman they like, they gonna have her if they want her."

If I feel tomorrow like I feel today,
If I feel tomorrow like I feel today,
Stand right here and look a thousand miles away.

"What they call a bad Negro in the South is a Negro that will really fight his own people," Bill went on. "The Negro that will fight the white man, they call him crazy, they don't call him bad, fact of the business, because they say he's gone nuts. The white man will call a Negro a bad seed . . ."

"He'd *ruin* the rest of the Negroes," Memphis interjected. "He would open the eyes of a lot of Negroes, tell um things that they didn't know. Otherwise," he chuckled, "he was a *smart* Negro."

"And he'd go around and get the *Chicago Defender* and bring it down here," said Bill. "You know what I mean, git it down here and read it to the Negroes."

"Speaking of the *Chicago Defender,*" Memphis interrupted, "I were in a place called Marigold, Mississippi. And you know, they had a restaurant in there and in back they had a peephole. And I thought they were gambling back there or something, and I went back there to see was they gambling. In fact, I was kinda stranded—I wanted to go back there and shoot a little crap and make me a little stake. And you can imagine what they were doing back there. They were reading the *Chicago Defender,* and they had a lookout man on the

door with a peephole. If a white man come into the restaurant, they'd stick the *Defender* into the stove, burn it up, and start playing checkers." Memphis laughed. "That's the way they had to smuggle the *Defender* down there. That's what they really call a bad Negro, a Negro that had nerve enough to smuggle the *Chicago Defender* down in the state of Mississippi where they didn't allow them to put um off there."

"That's what makes the Negro so *tetchious* till today," Bill said. "He has been denied in so many places until if a gang is in a place and they say 'You fellers get back' or 'Get over there' or 'Don't stand there' or something like that, they figger right straight that they're pointing at *them*—a lot of times they don't mean that. They really mean they don't want *nobody* standing there, but the Negro thinks, straight off, they referrin to him because he's black."

Sonny Boy had been listening to his two older friends for a long time. He had had no experience of the deeps of the South—the work camps, the prison farms, the wild life of the river that they had known. He was a boy right off the farm, whose half-mad genius on his Woolworth harmonica was gradually leading him out into the world.

But Sonny Boy knew how it was to feel "black and *tetchious*."

"Well, boys, I'll tell you what happened to me. My mother she bought a mule from, er-uh, Captain Mack. You know he's the boss of the county road—"

"Where's that?" asked Bill.

"Jackson, Tennessee. He's the boss on the county road, you know. They take you out on trucks and you build bridges, and you dig ditches and things like that. He sold my mother a mule, so by me bein young and everything, mother gave me the mule, and nachully, young boys, I'd run the mule. Course, the mule, he was a nice-looking mule. Well, finally, the mule got mired up in the bottom, and the mule dies—"

"Wait—wait a minute," Bill cut in.

"Is that the mule you married?" asked Memphis.

Sonny Boy began to stutter.

"That must be the mule you bought the hat for," Memphis cracked, and they burst into guffaws of country laughter, while Sonny Boy kept stuttering his story.

"Naw it ain't! Now listen! Just this old mule got *mired* up and died down there in the bottom."

"I understand."

"Yeah. So Captain Mack, he told my mother, say, 'I'm just crazy to get that damn boy out there on the country road, I'm gon do him like he did that mule.' And so my mother had to scuffle to keep me offa there. Every little move I'd make, he was watching me. And after all, he'd done sold the mule, and she paid him. But he say I kill the mule—"

Big Bill interrupted sharply, "That word, that word. We'll go back to that word they have down there: 'Kill a nigger, we'll hire another'n. Kill a mule . . .' " And here Sonny Boy joined in, "buy another'n."

Bill went on, "See, all those things go into the same word. The fact of the business, back in those days a Negro didn't mean no more to a white man than a mule."

"Didn't mean as much!" said Memphis.

"Didn't mean as much as a mule," said Sonny Boy.

"You'll agree to that?" asked Bill.

"Now I agree to that," answered Sonny.

"Well, that's the point we gittin to now." Bill went on, "You see, now you take a mule, they sell the mule. All right, then, there was times when they sold a Negro, too. What they looked at was just a face of a black man."

"I know a man at my home, they called him Mister White, that had a plantation about fifty or sixty miles square and he didn't even want a Negro to come through his place. The government highway ran through his land, you know? What they call a pike, a main highway where everybody had to go, but he built a special road, ran all around his place, and when you got there it was a sign said NEGRO TURN. You had to turn off the highway and go all around his plantation."

"I knew him, I knew him well," Memphis muttered.

"And this Mister White had all white fences around his place. The trees, he painted them high as he could reach. All his cattle, his sheeps, goats, hogs, cows, mules, hosses, and everything on his place was white. Anytime one of his animals have a black calf or a black goat—whatsonever it was—Mister White give it to the niggers. Even down to the chickens. He had all white chickens, too. And when a chicken would hatch off some black chickens, he'd say, 'Take those chickens out and find a nigger and give um to him. Get rid of um. I won't have no nigger chickens on this plantation!"

"And I've known," Bill continued, "it was a Negro and a white man standin at a railroad crossing, you know, just as you get into town? Negro and white man, just standing there talking. The white man was telling that Negro what he wanted him to do, and another Negro come drivin a wagon with a grey mule

and a black mule to the wagon. So this Negro drive up to the crossing, and the rails was kind of high there, see, and the wheel hit the rail, and the mule was tryin to pull over and he kept sayin, 'Git up, Git up!'

"So the white man holler up there, ask him, 'Hey,' says, 'do you know that's a white mule you talkin to?'

"And this Negro say right quick, 'Oh, *yes sir*! Git up, *Mister* Mule.' "

Bill and Memphis began to guffaw, and after a moment, when he got the point of the joke, Sonny Boy's laughter burst over him in torrents. Again he staggered off, howling with glee and beating his arms helplessly in the air. So we all laughed together, blowing the blues out of our lungs with laughter.

"Well, how about that Prince Albert tobacco, you know," gasped Memphis, when he could speak again.

"I've heard of that," said Bill.

"You know, if you go in a store, you didn't say 'Gimme a can of Prince Albert.' Not with that white man on the can."

"What would you say then?"

"Gimme a can of *Mister* Prince Albert."

We were caught up in gales of squalling laughter that racked Sonny Boy. We were howling down the absurdity, the perversity, and the madness that gripped the land of the levee, a beautiful and fecund land, rich in food and genius and good living, and song, yet turned into a sort of purgatory by fear.

Now for an instant we understood each other. Now in this moment of laughter, the thongs and the chains, the harsh customs of dominance, the stupid and brutalizing lies of race, had lost their fallacious dignity, but only for an instant. The blues would begin again their eternal rhythm, their eternal ironic comment:

The blues jumped a rabbit, run him a solid mile.
When the blues overtaken him, he hollered like a baby chile.

"Yeah," said Bill, his face becoming somber, "that's the way things go down around these little Southern places—enough to give anybody the blues."

They had begun with the blues as a record of problems of love and women in the Delta world. They had located the roots of these miseries in the stringent poverty and racial terror of black rural life. They recalled the pleasures and dangers of the Mississippi work camps, where the penitentiary stood at the end of the road, waiting to receive the rebellious. Finally, they came to the enormities of the lynch system that threatened anyone who defied the rules. Then,

overwhelmed by the absurdities of the Southern system, they laughed their way to the final curtain in true African style.

For me, the session was a triumph. Here at last, black working-class men had talked frankly, sagaciously, and with open resentment about the inequities of the Southern system of racial segregation and exploitation. An exposé of that system was on record. Also, a new order of eloquence in documentation had emerged out of a situation where members of a tradition could present their own case to each other. They had themselves stated why and how the blues had arisen in their homeland in the Mississippi Delta.

But Big Bill and his friends had another reaction to the recordings. I had agreed, perhaps mistakenly, to play back what they had recorded. The bluesmen listened with mounting apprehension and, in a powerful rush of words, attacked me for making the records, demanded that they be destroyed, then finally asked me to promise that I would never reveal their identities.

"Why, why?" I demanded. "What could you be afraid of, way up here in the North?"

"You don't know those peoples down there," they said.

It didn't matter that the three of them lived in Chicago. When those Deep Delta peckerwoods heard the records, they'd come looking for them. If they couldn't find them, they'd go after their *families,* burn down their houses, maybe kill them all out, Bill and Memphis assured me. This was America in 1948, but these three great artists of the blues, whose records right at that moment were spinning on jukeboxes all over the South, were terribly afraid.

So I promised to conceal their identities if the recording were ever released—an unlikely event so far as I could see—and I kept my promise until 1990. When this trialogue was published in the magazine *Common Ground* in 1948, I invented a fictitious setting and changed all the names. This fiction was maintained even in the 1959 United Artists release of the session, and the whole story was never told until the summer of 1990 when Ryko released the interview on a CD. There the three men finally played their own parts. There were warm reviews, four stars in *Entertainment Weekly,* and a national prize. At last America seemed ready to hear the tragic story that lies back of the blues. By then Sonny, Big Bill, and Memphis, all three, were dead.

Even after we had talked the matter out on that long-ago Sunday in New York, our mood remained subdued rather than triumphant. We knew we had made a real breakthrough and had opened up a dark period of history that had previously been hidden—they felt that as much as I did—yet a pall had fallen over our friendship. I invited them to stay on in New York, but though they

were still glowing from the great success of their concert, they pled urgent business in Chicago. They were polite, but they wanted to go home at once. They caught the next train west and I heard no more from them for years, even though, after the reviews of the Town Hall bash, Bill and Memphis began to get bookings in white clubs and eventually ended up working and living in Europe.

When I brought my recording gear back to the Delta twenty years later, in 1959, I decided to try to find out more about their hero, Charley Houlin, the Texan who shot down the sheriff to protect his renters. It was a dreamlike experience to drive through the Arkansas River bottoms, seeking the hero of my friends' legend of the good white man, and even more like a dream to drive into Hughes, Arkansas, the scene of the gunfight, and to discover, from the first person I met there, that Charley Houlin was still alive.

"You'll find Charley on _____ Street over cross the tracks. You can't miss his place; it's got big wide steps." Through the elm-lined streets of the old Delta town, across the tracks to the colored section, there was the sign HOULIN'S PLACE at the head of a broad wooden staircase. I left Shirley in the car, climbed the stairs, and pushed open the swinging saloon doors. The big barroom was empty except for a good-looking Creole lady who was polishing the long mahogany bar. Behind her rose a huge mirror bordered below by a triple row of bottles and decorated with an impressive array of revolvers, rifles, and shotguns in easy reach. When I asked for Mister Houlin, she turned and called in a soft voice, "Charley," and to me, "He'll be right out."

While I waited, I looked at all those guns and thought over what a black down the street had told me: "Charley Houlin is the fastest shot in Arkansas. Everybody knows that. Them state troopers don't even slow down in front of Charley Houlin's door, they just drive on by."

The Delta, especially the Arkansas side of the river, was still frontier in 1959, and Charley Houlin looked as if he'd stepped out of *Gunsmoke*. Compact, blond-haired with touches of grey, poker-faced, well groomed in West Texas style, he had the cold blue-eyed gaze of a gunman. We howdied and had a drink. He told me he'd left Texas because "things were gettin slow down there," had done well in Arkansas and decided to settle. I wanted to ask him more about his adventures, but I never got up my nerve. There was a reserve in Charley Houlin that kept one at a distance. When I told him I was recording black music, he turned to his Creole lady: "He ought to get together with old Forrest City Joe, oughtn't he, hon?"

That August afternoon I found Forrest City Joe Pugh sitting on the front gallery of a tavern identified in shaky lettering as THE OLD WHISKEY STORE, playing guitar for a group of loungers. I listened awhile, bought him a drink, and as we drove out into the country to find his musical buddies, he pulled out his harmonica and began to blow in the screaming, far-out style of Sonny Boy Williamson. Joe could play as well when the harmonica was inside his mouth or when he blew through his nostrils, as in the normal fashion. He also sang around and over the mouth harp so that the voice and instrument became one stream of continuous sound. When he finished, he knocked the spit out of the instrument and chuckled. "Someday this thing gonna buy me a car like yours!"

We found his favorite guitar player, Sonny Boy Rogers, weighing his last sack of cotton at the wagon down a muddy lane. It was cotton-picking time, everybody had money in their pockets, and Sonny Boy was in high good humor. Soon we were back in town with a carload of young blues musicians.

By nine o'clock the stereo recorder was sitting on the bar of a honky-tonk. Forrest City Joe and his two-piece band, Boy Blue with His Two, along with their girlfriends and other connoisseurs of the blues, were lapping up the liquor and pouring out the honky-tonk blues. No New York technician would have approved of the acoustics. Between takes the place was a bedlam, but the emotional atmosphere was mellow and marvelous. This was the first stereo field recording trip. When the musicians and their friends heard the "thwack" of the rhythm section coming from speaker A, and the squeal and moan of the singer–harp blower from speaker B, delight and approval were universal. The crowd danced during all the playbacks. The tall talk and the cussing led to some loud and inconclusive fights.

Forrest City Joe was at the top of his form. He convinced us both that I had discovered a new blues star. He played piano and guitar. He raved on through his harmonica, playing old pieces and improvising new ones. He moaned the story of a recent unhappy affair:

She used to be beautiful, but she lived her life too fast.
Now she runnin round,
Tryin to drink out of everybody's whiskey glass.

I had a good racket of sellin whiskey,
I told my baby so.
She wasn satisfied till she went to town
And let the chief of police know.

She used to be beautiful, but she lived her life too fast . . .

One thing, one thing, old buddy,
Forrest City Joe can't understand—
She cooked cornbread for me,
She cooked biscuits for her man.

She used to be beautiful, but she lived her life too fast.
Now she runnin round town,
Tryin to drink out of everybody's glass.

As I watched these wild young Arkansas blacks playing their "rocking" blues (with two guitars, drums, harmonica, and a heavy backbeat—very different from the country blues I normally recorded), I began to see how African their music making was. In sum, they were incredibly sociable—constantly interacting, clowning, and dancing with each other and the lively crowd around them; endlessly playful, laughing, making musical jokes, handling their instruments and their voices in all sorts of ways, always improvising with tone, text, tune, rhythm, and harmony; and supremely energetic—singing loud, playing hard, accenting powerfully, pushing the tempo, performing as if their very lives depended on every phrase. Think of James Brown at his peak, Louis Armstrong at his hottest, a Brazilian or Trinidadian carnival ramping down the avenue, a strolling street bard in West Africa with his mates tossing calabash rattles like Magic did a basketball—and you're looking at Forrest City Joe, Boy Blue, and their mates all that night in Hughes, Arkansas.

Two generations of white rockers have tried to emulate this style and have thus far failed, because the whites have not yet grasped the body-based African rhythmic scheme, which allows great intensity without being overemphatic, which fosters playfulness without being silly or losing the beat. Forrest City Joe and his friend had it all. That they were as clearly African as the Benin bronzes you can hear for yourself if you compare their recordings with matching cuts from Senegal and other parts of West Africa.

About 1 A.M., Charley Houlin came by to listen awhile. Then, as he told me good night, he suggested I make a visit to nearby West Memphis. "But you better check in with the sheriff when you get there. They keep West Memphis pretty tied down, if you know what I mean." I didn't, but I told him I would check in with that sheriff. By 3 A.M., I could scarcely see the typewriter to tap out the contracts with these eager young beavers of the Arkansas blues. At 4 A.M., I loaded the machine into the car. The youngsters went off to get a nap

before their cotton-picking day began. Joe wanted another drink and he deserved one.

As dawn came to Honky-tonk Row in Hughes, we had the machine packed into the car. We were both very happy. Joe was on records, bound, he thought, for stardom. Things had changed for the better. The 1954 Supreme Court decision was behind us; black and white kids were attending the same schools in the Delta. Here in Hughes he and I, black and white, had been able to fraternize in public without getting into trouble. Joe couldn't stop sounding off. He was so happy about the future he began to make up another world, better than the present one.

"What was the fastest man you ever heard of?" he asked the air, and then supplied the answer: "It was a man run so fast that God struck at him with lightning and missed. Missed three times. At last God gave up and said, 'Go, cat, go! . . .'

"That man so cross-eyed he had to lay flat on his back to look down the well. When he dug a well, the water tasted bent. And he was ugly! He was so ugly that he stood off God and scared the devil to death. That way he died when he got ready!"

We were weak with laughing. Two drunks, who had been listening, were staggering helplessly on the sidewalk, begging Joe to stop before he killed them. As for Joe, he seemed possessed of all the magic of black wit and music. The only way to say goodbye was to buy him another fifth and beat it. When I looked back, Joe had become a dusty, ragged figure between the railroad tracks and the honky-tonks.[3]

I followed Charley Houlin's instructions to the letter. When I reached West Memphis, my first act was to drive straight to the sheriff's house so as to establish my identity and clear myself. The sheriff was away, but I chatted for a few minutes with his wife, explaining to her, as she rocked and crocheted, what I wanted to do in her town. "I reckon it's all right. You just go on," she told me. "I'll tell the boss when he comes home."

Most of West Memphis seemed to consist of saloons and eating places. I walked into the biggest, loudest bar, got hold of a stein of beer, and wandered over to the crap table to watch the game. Gutbucket blues were growling on the jukebox. There was a low platform in one corner, clearly intended for live music. Things looked good. I was hanging out by the crap table, soaking in the icy beer and looking for somebody to ask about the blues, when I felt something hard poking me in the ribs. Then there were two somethings, one on each side.

I did the conventional thing. In spite of the beer mug, I put up both hands and looked over my shoulder. Two very unpleasant-looking deputies with badges had me at pistol point. In good round American they asked me who the hell I was and what I was doing there. I was looking to find blues singers; I had heard there were lots of blues singers playing in the bars. It seemed I was a goddam liar and "no such of a thing" and "we don't want your kind muscling in here," they insisted as they shoved me toward the door, and "we know what to do with your kind," as they pushed me out the front door and into their squad car.

One sat in front and drove, the other in back with his pistol stuck in me. I was getting scared and I managed to tell them that I had done what I was supposed to do, I had tried to check in, I had gone by the sheriff's house, like Mr. Houlin told me, and had checked in. But that was another goddam lie, I was told, you just don't want what's coming to you. I didn't, and I rather begged them "let's drive by and check with Mrs. Sheriff."

Well, why not, it won't take but a minute, and then we'll show you up for the lyin mmmp you are and then—but anyway we headed out for the sheriff's house. Thank God Mrs. Sheriff was still rocking and crocheting on the front porch. Very, very politely they helloed and then they told her who they had in the car and she said she'd see. She got up from her rocker and came out to the car and looked in and said, "That's him. That's the one. He was by here this afternoon."

They thank-you-ma'amed her and so did I. As they drove off, however, they explained to me again that, check or no check, Houlin or no Houlin, they didn't want my kind snooping or muscling in or whatever it was I was doing in West Memphis and I should get in my car and my tires should burn the pavement until I had left there. They dropped me at my car and again let me know that they didn't want to see me around town that evening.

I followed instructions. I went to the motel, where I'd stashed Shirley for safety's sake, and we did burn rubber and got out of West Memphis, Arkansas. As we drove along through the darkling river bottoms, I realized we were close to Hamp's Place, the country honky-tonk where this tale began. I tried to tell Shirley how it was when Willie B. and William Brown and I had crossed over that river bridge twenty years earlier, about that long-ago mellow evening, when we were young and reckless and full of whiskey. Down deep we had felt helpless in the face of giant and implacable injustice. But since then, things had taken a better turn.

My encounter with the West Memphis cops was *old* stuff; the *new* was the

session I'd had with Forrest City Joe and his friends. And that had taken place right in the heart of the Delta. The free and easy feeling of those happy hours symbolized profound shifts in Southern mores. Doors were opening that had been closed to blacks for centuries. Perhaps Gunnar Myrdal had been right when he said that Constitution was the very marrow of American folklore, and that once the Jim Crow rules had been declared unconstitutional by the Court, most of the white South would go along with that decision. Of course, some places were changing more slowly than others. But the main social barriers had been breached. Moreoever, it was clear that the blues, with its tide of African irony and rhythm, would surge on, uncheckable, like the big river down there under the bridge, laughing and singing to itself about the new times coming.

The sun gonna shine in my back door some day,
The wind gonna rise and blow my blues away . . .