



ods of commercial farming, and agricultural diversity as well as industrialization. By 1900, the per capita income in the South was 51 percent of the national average, having declined steadily for four decades. As could be expected, the rural black population was the most impoverished social group.<sup>2</sup>

The blues sprang from this environment of agrarian poverty and racial segregation, a folk music indigenous to the cotton belt farming communities and seeming to flower in those regions most heavily populated by African-American farm workers. The Mississippi Delta, East Texas, and the Piedmont were the key regions where the blues emerged as a popular form of folksong before they rose to national prominence during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Each of these early blues cultural formations contributed to a truly original folk music that matured in relative isolation from the dominant white culture.

### Delta Blues Origins

The home soil of the Delta blues was the flat fertile farmland on either side of the Mississippi River stretching from Memphis, Tennessee, some two hundred miles south to Vicksburg, Mississippi. The eastern border of the Delta was formed by the barren hills of central Mississippi; its western border, was the Ozark plateau in Arkansas.

Beginning in the 1840s, the lower eastern segment of the Delta emerged as one of the richest cotton-producing areas in the South. It attracted white planters and their slaves, who first cleared the land and then toiled in the fields, planting, cultivating, and harvesting the cotton crops. There was a further influx of planters and farm workers after the Civil War into the upper, more remote Delta hinterlands, where the plantations were organized into many smaller sharecropping parcels farmed by individuals or families. By the 1890s, African Americans were more heavily concentrated in the Delta region than anywhere else in the South and outnumbered the white population by three to one. The influx continued until World War I, at which time the black population in the Delta outnumbered the white by four to one. During that thirty-year period, the entire region was transformed from a swampy frontier wilderness into a bustling labor-intensive agricultural assembly line. The Delta now had two cash crops; in addition to the resurrection of King Cotton, there was a booming lumber industry. Moreover, complementing the Mississippi waterway was a new network of railroads linking the area to the outside world from all directions.

Yet, as we have seen, for the black sharecroppers the plantations were feudal in character. This concentrated black population tied to the plantation economy and segregated from the average white citizenry, combined with the general backwardness of the region, provided the cultural mesh in which the Delta blues would take root, grow, and eventually flourish.<sup>3</sup>

The first Delta blues were made up by rural laborers at work, according to most of the primary sources on the music's origins. The earliest known blues in this region were closely akin to the worksongs and field hollers still prevalent at the time. Delta-born bluesman Albert Luandrew, also known as Sunnyland Slim, who grew up in Vance, Mississippi, in the early 1900s, recalled:

They were singing the blues in Mississippi and Louisiana ever since there were colored peoples living there to my way of knowing. They sang in cotton fields and in the prison camps and the levee camps. Peoples on the county farm cutting trees with an axe sang, "Oh Captain, believe it's quitting time." People picking cotton were crying out, "Oh, I'm a poor boy long way from home." They weren't doin' it for no money or nothin' like that. No, they was doin' it 'cause it just sound so good to them, you know, it allowed for 'em to express themselves. People standing out for miles along the railroads and highways singing, "Oh it ain't gonna rain no more," and "Sun gonna shine in my door someday, yeah." This was the oldest blues I ever knowed.<sup>4</sup>

Fellow Mississippian McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters, also remarked on the influence of rural work habits on the music of the Delta, in this case, his own:

You just make things up when you're working out on the plantation. You get lonesome and tired and hot and you start to sing you something. And so all that stuff come to me real good. I can remember that a lot of the records I have made, I first made those songs up during my workdays out on the farm.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest written description of a Delta blues song text dates to 1901. In June of that year a Harvard archeologist named Charles Peabody, who was excavating an Indian burial site close to Stovall, Mississippi, hired a group of black workers in Clarksdale as diggers. Peabody kept detailed notes on the folk music he heard performed by the black workers he hired and later used them in an article, "Notes on Negro Music," published in 1903 in the *Journal of American Folklore*.<sup>6</sup> The songs he documented in the article included work-

songs, field hollers, ragtime songs, and a few blues verses that proved to be very popular throughout the South. Some of the worksongs were improvised on the spot by Ike Antoine, the workers' designated song leader. One pointed example—

I'm so tired I'm 'most dead,  
Sittin' up there playin' mumbley peg?—

was actually composed while Peabody and another white man were playing the knife game in front of the black work crew. The article describes field hollers as "strains of apparently genuine African music," and quotes a "ragtime" folksong with a guitar accompaniment that poked fun at black preachers:

Some folk say preachers won't steal,  
But I found two in my cornfield.  
One with a shovel and t' other with a hoe,  
A-diggin up my taters row by row.<sup>8</sup>

Another kind of folksong that Peabody heard his work crew sing in the evenings was the "hard luck tale." Among the lyrics he wrote down were:

They arrested me for murder  
And I never harmed a man.<sup>9</sup>

Well I thought I heard that KC whistle blow,  
Blow lak' she never blew befo'.<sup>10</sup>

The reason I love my baby so  
'Cause when she gets five dollars she give me fo'.<sup>11</sup>

Folklorist Howard Odum visited the Mississippi Delta as part of a fieldtrip through the South's cotton belt between 1905 and 1908. Half the songs he collected from the African-American "songsters" and "musicians" he encountered were blues or blues-related. In addition, many of the songs he heard featured a guitarist using a slider—a technique common among Delta blues musicians. Odum wrote down one line that enjoyed widespread use throughout the cotton belt: "I got the blues and can't be satisfied."<sup>12</sup>

For the most part, overt protest was absent from the early Delta blues. The social commentary was confined to descriptions of the hardships and injustices experienced by African Americans in the region; there were no frontal assaults on segregation or political disenfranchisement. Yet protest was implicit in

these new blues songs because they described events and expressed feelings from the perspective of a group relegated to the lowest levels of the Delta's rigid caste system. Such an outlook, based on the collective experience of rural black workers, was bound to come into conflict with the ideology of the dominant white culture.

Although the Delta blues initially came out of cotton farming and the work routines of black farm workers, they soon gravitated toward the recreational activities of the region's segregated black enclaves, especially social gatherings such as picnics, barbecues, fish fries, sporting events, holiday parties, and country dances. Music was an integral part of the entire spectrum of social activity—from the spirituals and gospel songs of the Sunday morning church meetings to the uptempo rags and party tunes played at the Saturday night dances—but, as could be expected, the infectious rhythms and candid lyrics of the blues found a more receptive audience at the Saturday night celebrations.

The Saturday night social gatherings were communal rituals of resistance that originated during slavery. Since the slaves worked six days a week from sunup to sundown, Saturday evening was the only time they had for recreational activities. Most plantation owners allowed their slaves to hold a dance or to attend one on a nearby plantation, and these get-togethers were the highlight of the week. One ex-slave recalled:

Law me, us had a good time in demdays.  
Us danced most ebry Sattidy night  
And us made de rafters shake wid us foots.<sup>13</sup>

Besides shaking rafters, the Saturday night gatherings also facilitated communication and group solidarity. Sometimes the talk centered on Africa, where the slaves before losing their freedom had "done what they wanted."<sup>14</sup> Such gatherings were one of the ways that their desire for freedom was kept alive during captivity.

After the Civil War, the tradition of the Saturday night dance continued on many of the resurrected cotton plantations in the South. During this period, the dance evolved into a festive and at times rowdy gathering where African-American men and women came together to socialize and seek release from a long week of work. Dances were held either in local homes or outdoors if the weather permitted; much later, "juke joints" were opened to accommodate these parties on a regular basis. Coal lamps provided the lighting. Freshly cooked food, homebrew, and moonshine were sold cheaply. There was usually some gambling, talking, and flirting on the periphery of the gatherings, but the center of activity was the dancing.

Music for the Saturday night dances traditionally had been the purview of black fiddlers. The fiddle was the most widely used instrument among

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African Americans until the Civil War, surpassing even the banjo. Most black fiddlers who grew up after emancipation learned their musical techniques and repertoire from former slaves. Delta bluesman Sam Chatmon recalled that his father, a former slave from Mississippi who died in 1934 at the age of 109, learned to play the fiddle from an older fellow slave. They often played together at white plantation dances, as well as at dances in the slave quarters. Their favorite tunes, played at both occasions, included "Little Lisa Jane," "Chicken in the Birdbath," and "Old Grey Mare"—all of Anglo-American origin. The elder Chatmon had a large extended family and taught many of them to play the fiddle or the four-string banjo, which was the instrument that Sam Chatmon first played as a youth. Butch Cage was another second-generation Mississippi fiddle player who learned his instrument from older black musicians. The first tunes he was taught to perform were also mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-American standards like "Dixie," "Arkansas Traveler," "Old Mule," and "Hell Broke Loose in Georgia." W. C. Handy's grandfather played the fiddle as a slave and told him about an early method of making rhythm for the dance music by having a second person drum on the fiddle strings with a set of knitting needles. Later, Handy's uncle, also a traditional fiddler, taught him how to master the knitting-needle percussive technique and allowed his nephew to accompany him occasionally at country dances. Each of these accounts of postbellum black male fiddlers suggests that they drew heavily on Anglo-American fiddle tunes but played them in their own style. The dance music they played syncritized the folk materials and instrumental techniques from both traditions and was played before both black and white audiences.<sup>15</sup>

The Delta blues represented a definitive break with the "old-time" country dance music. Although African Americans danced to the blues, the dances changed, since the music was primarily drawn from folk sources other than the Anglo-American fiddle tradition. Square dancing gave way to slow and intimate couple-dancing or upbeat "hip-shaking" routines. Moreover, the early Delta blues used different musical instruments—the guitar and the harmonica rather than the fiddle and the banjo. In particular, the adaptation of the guitar to the rural blues idiom proved to be a major innovation that would have far-reaching consequences.

In the Delta, black guitarists either began by learning to play instruments like the banjo or the mandolin and adapted those playing techniques to the guitar or began their musical training on a homemade guitar, often with just one string. Musicians who came to the guitar from other instruments were likely to have more formal training and to be able to play more styles of black folk music than just the blues. They often came from families like the Chatmons and the Handys that had well-established traditions as schooled musicians and grew up listening to and learning to play the music of their parents

and grandparents on many different musical instruments. Thus, their approach to the guitar and the blues overall was both more sophisticated and more conventional than that of the self-taught Delta bluesmen.

The self-taught Delta guitar players were often, paradoxically, both the most traditional and the most original interpreters of the rural blues: original because they developed a sound that was unprecedented in both African-American and Anglo-American folk music; traditional because the one-string instruments they learned on were the progeny of the ancient musical bow, a common folk instrument for centuries in West Africa. The cultural practices associated with making and playing the musical bow were diffused throughout the African diaspora: in Brazil it was called the "berimbau"; in the southern United States it was known to the children who used it as a "didley bow" or a "jitterbug." One-string instruments in the Delta were usually made by attaching a taut wire to the side of a house or a barn. The aspiring musician plucked out repetitive, one-measure figures with one hand while using the other to slide some sort of hard, smooth device along the wire to get the desired tone. Mississippi bluesmen Big Joe Williams, Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Fenton Robinson, and B. B. King all began their musical careers on homemade one-string instruments.<sup>16</sup>

A similar musical technique found throughout the Mississippi Delta was the practice of pressing an object like a rock, a knife, or a bottleneck against the resonating strings of various types of string instruments to produce extended musical phrases that sounded like the human voice. This practice of imitating vocal timbre and diction was adopted at an early stage in the development of Delta blues. W. C. Handy described his first encounter with the soon-to-be-famous Mississippi Delta "bottleneck" or "slide" guitar style while stranded at the Tutwiler, Mississippi, train station in 1903:

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plucking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife blade on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. His song, too, struck me instantly:

Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard.<sup>17</sup>

Handy erred in tracing the slide guitar style to Hawaii; from all indications, it was simultaneously developed in the Delta.

The appearance of black slide guitarists in the early 1900s has often been linked to the popularization of a similar technique by Hawaiian guitarists, but slide guitar wasn't native to Hawaii; it was introduced there between 1893 and 1895 reputedly by a school boy, Joseph Kekaka. It did not spread from Hawaii to the mainland until 1900, when it was popularized by Frank Ferera, and by that time black guitarists in Mississippi were already fretting their instruments with knives or the broken-off necks of bottles.<sup>18</sup>

The slide technique was especially appealing to the early blues musicians because it allowed them to approximate on their guitars the sounds and the phrasings of the arhoolies. The use of a slide was a key innovation, unique to folk music in the United States. In time, it would become inseparable from the Delta blues tradition.

### Delta Blues Pioneers

The earliest blues singers and musicians to become well known in the Delta were fieldhands whose musical activities were most often secondary to their cotton farming. They played on weekends and holidays for free drinks and tips at local parties and social events, perhaps with a few other musicians. By performing with others before their friends and neighbors, they gained valuable support that helped them to develop a repertoire and a performing style. Because the music was learned through repetition but played intuitively on each occasion, it continued to be a spontaneous expression of the African-American oral tradition in the Delta area. As long as there was a functional relationship between the rural blues and the black-belt farming communities in which they originated, the folk roots of the music remained intact and exhibited an ongoing vitality. By the turn of the century, some of the more talented and determined of the blues musicians in the Delta were gaining wider recognition. They began traveling to surrounding black enclaves to perform their music before larger audiences and attracting young apprentice musicians.

Big Bill Broonzy: "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad"

William Lee Conley Broonzy, known affectionately as "Big Bill," was born on a tenant farm in the Mississippi Delta on June 26, 1893. His parents had grown up during slavery, and the family was poor, religious, and large. There were twenty-one children in all; most of them worked in the cotton fields with

their parents, but a few were allowed to go to school. Because Broonzy grew tall and strong at an early age, he had to work in the fields. At the age of seven, he started working as a plowhand; it was to be his primary vocation until his flight to Chicago fifteen years later. Broonzy was ten years old when his uncle, Jerry Blecher, taught him the rudiments of playing a homemade fiddle fashioned out of a cigar box. Blecher played a five-string banjo; his repertoire and the repertoires of his fellow musicians included many of the region's earliest folk blues: "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad," "Mindin' My Own Business," "Crow Jane," "See See Rider," and "Joe Turner Blues." The first two are standard folk blues in the AAB stanza pattern:

Goin' down this road feeling bad, baby,  
I'm goin' down this road feeling so miserable and sad.  
I ain't gonna be treated this way.

Take six months to tend my business, six months to leave  
other people's alone.

Six months to tend my business, six months to leave other  
people's alone,

By the time I do that, I declare the whole twelve months  
is gone.<sup>19</sup>

"Joe Turner Blues" is built around the more archaic AAA pattern:

They tell me Joe Turner been here and gone,  
Lord, they tell me Joe Turner been here and gone,  
They tell me Joe Turner been here and gone.<sup>20</sup>

According to Broonzy, the song pays tribute to a good samaritan who helped out black families during a devastating Mississippi River flood in 1892. Another version of "Joe Turner" popular in the Memphis region is about a malevolent lawman named Joe Turney, who took black prisoners to the Tennessee State Penitentiary in Nashville between 1892 and 1896; W. C. Handy published his rendition of this folk blues in 1915. Broonzy also talked about an itinerant Delta bluesman called C. C. Rider, who played a one-string fiddle and claimed to have written the "See See Rider Blues," after himself. However, there are no other accounts of such a character in the early oral histories of the blues in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>21</sup>

Charley Patton: "Moon Going Down"

Charley Patton was the heart and soul of the early Delta blues tradition. In his prime he was the most famous blues artist in the region. One of his protégés

referred to him as "a great man," and his principal biographer calls him "the conscience of the Delta."<sup>22</sup> Patton was born on a farm near Bolton, and Edwards, Mississippi, two small towns located just west of Jackson, the state capital. His birth is listed in the 1900 census as having occurred in April 1891, which would make him one of the youngest of the first-generation Delta bluesmen. He was one of twelve children, seven of whom died before reaching their teens. This was an unusually high child mortality rate, even for a poor rural black family, and it no doubt had an impact on Patton. Death would be a prominent theme in his later blues and spiritual compositions. His mother, Annie Patton, was part African American and part Native American; his father, Bill Patton, had African-American, Native-American, and white ancestors. Bill Patton was a farmer, a lay preacher, and a stern disciplinarian who used his bullwhip on his son in a futile effort to prevent him from becoming a blues musician.

While still a child, Charley Patton learned to play a guitar in the company of the Chatmon clan, who lived close by. The Chatmons were a large family with a tradition of performing music together that was in its third generation. They played stringband music for white square dances and black social gatherings. Their repertoire did not include the blues until after the turn of the century, and it is unlikely that Charley Patton was introduced to this new folk music before moving with his family to Dockery's plantation farther north in the Delta near Drew, Mississippi, between 1901 and 1904.<sup>23</sup>

Drew was a new town built in the 1890s on land taken back from the Mississippi River. It had previously been swampland but was cleared and cultivated after the construction of a levee system to protect the land from the annual spring floods that plagued the entire Mississippi basin. Will Dockery founded his plantation, called Dockery Farms, near Drew in 1895 on forty square miles of wild, wooded, swampy bottomland. The son of a slaveowner who lost most of his wealth during the Civil War, Dockery worked tirelessly to establish his own cotton kingdom near Drew and across the river in Arkansas. His empire-building spirit ultimately inspired him to have his own railroad line constructed, linking Dockery Farms to the nearby town of Cleveland. Called the "Pea Vine" by the black fieldhands because of its circuitous route to and from Dockery's, it was eventually immortalized by Charley Patton in "Pea Vine Blues." In the heyday of the plantation, Dockery employed up to eight hundred black workers and issued paper money for use in the general store. Many of the workers lived in the residential camp, which they called "the Quarters," a reference to the old slave living quarters on antebellum plantations and, by implication, to the lack of change in the postbellum era. The Quarters consisted of about a dozen boarding houses for single men and women and a smaller number of separate family dwellings. In most accounts, Will Dockery was a benevolent and paternalistic "bossman" by Delta stan-

dards. He employed African Americans as middle-level managers of his company town, sponsored "free" picnics for his workers, and encouraged music making on his plantation.<sup>24</sup>

At Dockery's, young Charley Patton came under the influence of a small group of older black musicians, who introduced him to the blues. The standout of this group was Henry Sloan, who was twenty years older than Patton. Sloan had lived for a time in the "hill country" west of Jackson and had moved to Dockery's around 1900. He is remembered as the leading musician on the plantation before Charley Patton's ascendancy and as the man most responsible for Patton's early blues style and repertoire. Sloan moved to Chicago during World War I and dropped out of sight. He was never recorded, but he was clearly one of the founding fathers of the Delta blues tradition.<sup>25</sup>

By the 1910s, Patton was emerging as the most influential blues musician in the Drew area, and Dockery's plantation became a focal point of local blues activity. In addition to Patton and Sloan, the Dockery group included Jack Hicks, Ben Maree, Dick Bankston, Jim Holloway, Mott Willis, and Jake Martin; they were all transitional folk musicians, spanning the gap between the established songster tradition and the newly emerging blues tradition. Equally important, Patton and the rest of the Dockery group were beginning to attract younger disciples like Willie Brown, Kid Bailey, and Tommy Johnson and, later, Son House, Robert Johnson, Bukka White, and Chester Burnett, also known as Howling Wolf. These men would be instrumental in establishing the Delta blues tradition as one of the most formidable in the entire South.

Those who knew Charley Patton remember him as a small, vigorous man with a coarse, rasping voice. A photograph taken of him while still a young man reveals the light complexion, large ears, curly, slicked-down hair, crooked bow tie, and Huck Finn facial features that led a fellow musician to say, "He looked like a Mexican."<sup>26</sup> A flashy dresser who always wore expensive suits, ties, and shoes and a Stetson hat, Patton went through eight marriages and once had his throat cut by a jealous husband. He was also a mercurial rambler and a rowdy, fun-loving prankster who loved to drink and socialize and cut up. In one of his songs he boasts:

I love to fuss and fight,  
I love to fuss and fight,  
Lord, and get sloppy drunk off a bottle of bond  
And walk the streets all night.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, Charley Patton was remembered as a flamboyant and charismatic blues performer. Once in front of an audience, he not only sang but also danced, told tall tales, bantered with fellow musicians, and played his guitar behind his head, between his legs, or lying on his back. Patton's guitar playing

emphasized rhythms over melodies. He played the guitar more like a drum than a string instrument, picking propulsive bass runs, hammering out percussive patterns on the treble strings, and hitting the "sound box" or hollow guitar body with the palm of his hand like a bass drum. According to Robert Palmer, "Most of the rhythmic devices that Patton uses have counterparts in West African drumming, and he uses them in an African manner, stacking rhythms on top of each other in order to build up a dense, layered rhythmic complexity."<sup>28</sup> Patton also made use of African-derived vocal technique. He habitually used his voice like a musical instrument. It is often hard to understand his lyrics because he alters his speech patterns to achieve certain rhythmic effects. He also uses a call and response framework for many of his songs. For example, in "Spoonful Blues" Patton creates four separate voice parts that engage each other in a call and response dialogue. There are his regular singing voice, his falsetto singing voice, his spoken word voice, and the voice of his guitar "singing" the phrase "spoonful" with the help of a slider.<sup>29</sup>

Charley Patton's repertoire was indicative of his rural upbringing and lifestyle, as well as his semi-professional status as a leading Delta bluesman. Several of the songs he performed were his own renditions of traditional spirituals such as "I'm Going Home," "I Shall Not Be Moved," "Nearer My God to Thee," and "Old Ship of Zion." He also composed his own sacred songs, which he often included in the sermons he preached from time to time in local churches. His favorite hymn, according to his niece, contains the verse:

Jesus is my God, I know his name,  
His name is all my trust.  
He would not put my soul to shame  
Or let my hopes be lost.<sup>30</sup>

Patton's calling as a preacher was eclipsed by his attraction to secular song—ballads, ragtime, and especially the blues. He was well schooled in the entire spectrum of black folk music popular in his locale, but the blues he composed and sang were his most personal achievements. To create his melodies, he generally reworked three basic blues "tune families" over and over again; hence, many of his songs sound similar. As for his lyrics, he fused vignettes of Delta life and love with his favorite epigrams and folk sayings from the black oral tradition (for example, "I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long," "Handful of gimmie and a mouthful of much obliged," "Hard times at your front door, blues all around your bed," "Blues come down like showers of rain"). His better-known compositions contain numerous references to local people, in particular his women friends and fellow musicians,

but also white lawmen and plantation owners, references to Delta towns like Belzoni, Clarksdale, Lula, Greenville, Joiner, and Vicksburg, and references to local events he was caught up in, such as an ordeal in jail ("High Sheriff Blues") or the flooding of the Mississippi basin in 1927 ("High Water Everywhere") or the 1929 Delta drought ("Dry Well Blues"). A niece of Patton's recalled that he would often "dream a song . . . get up and write it down."<sup>31</sup> (Dreams were an important source of inspiration for many of the rural blues artists in the South.)

Charley Patton recorded a total of fifty titles at four different sessions between 1929 and 1934; thirty-five are blues, ten are sacred numbers, three are black folk ballads, and two are ragtime songs.<sup>32</sup> His blues songs are pregnant with rural metaphor and social commentary. His signature piece, "Pony Blues," for example, celebrates social mobility in a rural setting:

Hey, hitch up my pony, saddle up my black mare,  
Hitch up my pony, saddle up my black mare,  
I'm gonna find a rider, baby, in the world somewhere.<sup>33</sup>

The underlying emphasis on freedom of movement is tied to the search for a "rider" or mate, which in turn is linked to the promise of personal satisfaction. It can only be found "somewhere" beyond the confines of the immediate social reality. This is a recurrent theme in rural folk blues, one that was often expressed in the songs of the early Delta blues artists.

Critical social commentary is more explicitly evident in songs like "High Sheriff Blues," which describes Patton's incarceration in the Belzoni jail. The lyrics give a fleeting glance at the sharp race and class divisions prevalent in the Delta during this period:

I was in trouble ain't no use screamin' and . . .  
When I was in prison it ain't no use screamin' an' cryin',  
Mr. Purvis in his mansion he jes' pay no mind.<sup>34</sup>

Or consider these verses from "Down the Dirt Road Blues":

I'm goin' away to a world unknown,  
I'm goin' away to a world unknown,  
I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long.

Everyday seems like murder here (my God I'm gonna sing 'em),  
Everyday seems like murder here,  
I'm gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don't bit more care.<sup>35</sup>



In other songs, Patton extends his social concern to a wider milieu. In "34 [1934] Blues," Patton sings bitterly about being ordered off Will Dockery's plantation and links his hardship to the suffering of others through the depression:

He run me from Will Dockery's, Willie Brown, hunt you a job,  
 He run me from Will Dockery's, Willie Brown, hunt you a job  
 (wonder what's the matter),  
 He went an' told Papa Charley, don't want you hangin' round on my  
 job no more.

Further down the country it almost make you cry,  
 Further down the country it almost make you cry (my God, Children),  
 Women and children flaggin' freight trains for rides.

And it may bring sorrow, it may bring tears,  
 It may bring sorrow, Lord, it may bring tears,  
 Oh, Lord, oh Lord, spare me to see a brand new year.<sup>36</sup>

"Revenue Man Blues" conjures up the specter of white vigilantes on the prowl—

Aw the revenue men is ridin', boy, you'd better look out—<sup>37</sup>

though this most likely refers to the local lawman assigned to uphold the Prohibition laws of the 1920s. "Tom Rushing" is about a deputy sheriff in Bolivar County assigned to tracking down moonshiners and bootleggers who had arrested a bootlegger named Holloway, a friend of Patton's.<sup>38</sup>

Once you get in trouble, there's no use screamin' an' cryin',  
 When you get in trouble, there's no use screamin' an' cryin',  
 Tom Rushing will take you back to Cleveland flyin'.<sup>39</sup>

"Mean Black Moan" is about a railroad strike in Chicago, which Patton visited in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It is the only topical blues that he recorded that takes place outside the Delta:

Ninety men were laid off at a railroad shop,  
 Ninety men were laid off, Lord, at a railroad shop,  
 And the strike in Chicago, Lordy Lord, it just won't stop.<sup>40</sup>

In the song Patton expresses concern for the plight of the workers, who are hungry and unable to pay their rent as the strike goes into its third month with no end in sight.

"High Water Everywhere" is a frantic portrait of the devastating 1927 Mississippi River flood. Spring rains and a swollen river caused the levees to break at several locations in the Mississippi basin, including one just north of Greenville, Mississippi. The flooding caused a three-hundred-mile-wide lake in the Delta. African Americans living in the area were forced to take refuge in a hastily constructed tent city on high ground near Greenville, where they were confined for two months while the waters receded. Many were also pressed into work gangs by the National Guard, which had been put in charge of cleaning up and keeping order. One black man was shot dead by the guardsmen for refusing to work. Overall, 125 people were killed in Mississippi as a result of the flood and thousands of homes were destroyed.<sup>41</sup> Patton recounts his own troubles when the rising flood waters "drove poor Charley down the line." He exclaims, "I would go to the hill country but they got me barred," a reference to the state of emergency being enforced by the white guardsmen that restricted African Americans to the tent cities. After assessing the situation at Greenville and Leland and even across the river in Blytheville and Joiner, all of which were under water, Patton ends his narrative by eulogizing "fifty men and children, come to sink and drown, . . . women and children sinking down, Lord have mercy."<sup>42</sup>

Throughout his career in the 1910s and 1920s, Charley Patton was constantly on the move in the Delta and the hill country to the south where he was born. He was prosperous enough to own a car, which gave him the freedom of movement so important to rural blues performers, as well as a certain amount of prestige and status. As a result, he was able to cultivate an extensive audience for his music not only among the black populace but also among white people, who often hired him to perform at their social affairs. On occasion, he traveled north to Memphis, St. Louis, and even Chicago to perform. By the onset of the depression, when he began his recording career, his fame as a blues artist was without an equal in the Mississippi Delta, and it was beginning to spread to other regions of the country. But Patton was unable to achieve national recognition before he died. In the early 1930s he began to experience heart problems, which caused fatigue and shortness of breath. In 1934, under the care of a doctor, he traveled to New York for his last recording session, in which he recorded his version of "I Know My Time Ain't Long"; he retitled it "Oh, Death." This song and his earlier sacred records, "The Prayer of Death" and "You're Gonna Need Someone When You Die," attest to his enduring fear of death. Soon after he returned to the Delta, he was bedridden with bronchitis. He lay in bed for a week preaching from the Book of Revelations and then died. He had just turned forty-three. The black news-



papers that advertised his records failed to mention his passing, but his funeral was attended by hundreds of friends and fans.<sup>43</sup>

### Delta Blues Networks

Charley Patton's prominence in the formative years of Delta blues culture stems from his charisma as a folk artist and his life-long association with an informal network of fellow blues musicians and apprentices. Patton was at the center of a nexus of blues artists destined to become the region's most famous exponents of the music. While the evidence suggests that there were numerous informal networks, "extended families," or "schools" of blues musicians in and around the Delta region—especially after the turn of the century—it is also obvious that Patton and his associates gained the most popular acclaim. As a consequence, their lives and music have been more thoroughly documented than have most of their contemporaries. Thus while they are certainly not the only Delta blues network or "tree" of relationships to take root and grow to maturity during this period, they are representative of those that did, and the abundance of information on them makes it much easier to discern how that came about.

The three most influential of the younger Delta bluesmen who played with Charley Patton during his heyday were Willie Brown, Tommy Johnson, and Son House. Willie Brown spent most of his life in the Delta, where he worked as a sharecropper and played music in his spare time. He joined Patton on Dockery's plantation around 1911, when he was still in his teens, and played regularly with him thereafter. Willie's trademark was his versatile guitar playing. He was admired for his masterful approach to the standard blues line and was always in demand as a second guitarist backing up other Delta bluesmen. Brown composed only a few of his own blues, and most of those relied heavily on material garnered from Patton. His best-known composition, "Future Blues," was an adaptation of Patton's "Moon Going Down"; however, its rhythmic guitar accompaniment was a classic piece of Delta blues much emulated by rural guitarists attracted to the idiom. Willie Brown appears to have been an unassuming blues musician who formed strong bonds of friendship with his fellow bluesmen. He is mentioned prominently in the blues lyrics of Charley Patton and, later, Robert Johnson. He was indispensable to Patton when he was performing in the Delta, and then he teamed up with Son House for a time before he died in the mid-1940s.<sup>44</sup>

Willie Brown was married to Josie Bush, an older blues singer and guitarist from nearby Florence, Mississippi. They met in the Drew area around 1911

and often played together in public. Bush was generally considered to be the best female blues musician in the region. Her much-copied signature piece, "Riverside Blues," is a song she had learned in her youth from a blues singer named Willie Love, who came from south of the Delta. The prevailing social conditions made it difficult for black women to join the growing ranks of the semi-professional blues performers; it was much more dangerous for them than for their male counterparts to live in the rough-and-tumble milieu of the itinerant blues musicians. If a young black woman was inclined toward music during this period, more than likely she sang in a church choir or joined a traveling minstrel troupe. Those few women in the Delta who proved to be the exceptions were Josie Bush, Louise Johnson, Lucille Davis, and Mattie Delaney. Davis and Delaney were also guitarists; Johnson played the piano. Johnson was a companion of Charley Patton and Willie Brown; she accompanied them on an excursion north in 1930 to a recording session where she recorded four piano blues, including her signature piece, "On the Wall." Delaney also was recorded during this period, but she and Johnson were the only two women participating in early Delta blues culture who were recording artists.<sup>45</sup>

### Tommy Johnson: "Canned Heat Killin' Me"

Tommy Johnson, another talented pupil of Charley Patton's, absorbed much of his mentor's performing style and repertoire before moving on to establish himself as a major Delta blues artist in his own right. Johnson was born some time before the turn of the century in Crystal Springs, Mississippi, a small town south of Vicksburg; he grew up in a large family that seems to have been musical. He and one of his brothers spent time near Dockery's during World War I, and then again in 1921. During his visits to the Delta, Johnson developed a taste for alcohol, women, and the Devil. He told his brother how he sold his soul to the Devil in return for his talents as a blues musician. It happened—so the legend goes—at a deserted Delta crossroads at midnight during a full moon where Johnson was sitting, playing the blues on his guitar. A large black man appeared from nowhere, took his guitar, tuned it, played a blues number, and then gave it back. The crossroads is the traditional domain of Legba, a Yoruban trickster god who became identified with Satan, the Christian Devil, during slavery. The African Americans' version of the Christian Devil remained a trickster figure in their folklore, and it was this trickster persona that Tommy Johnson reveled in. He took to wearing a large rabbit's foot around his neck and was delighted to be known as someone in league with the Devil. It went with his act. He developed into a flamboyant showman, playing his guitar behind his back, over his head, and between his legs much like Charley Patton. As Delta bluesman Houston Stackhouse recalled:

He'd clown sometimes. He'd kick the guitar, flip it, turn it back of his head and be playin' it, then he'd get straddled over it like he was ridin' a mule; pick it that way. All that kind of rot. Oh, Tommy Johnson would tear it up, man. People loved to see that. People went for his jive, what he was putting down.<sup>46</sup>

In the mid-twenties, Tommy Johnson moved to Jackson, Mississippi, on the southeast periphery of the Delta farmlands, where he played regularly and built up a substantial reputation as the top blues performer in town. At the time, Jackson was fast becoming a hub of blues activity. It was the home base for the Chatmon brothers' popular blues-oriented string band, the Mississippi Sheiks, as well as for other regional blues musicians like the McCoy brothers, James Cole, Walter Vincent, Babe Stovall, Skip James, Tommy Bradley, "Memphis" Minnie Douglas, Eddie Dimmitt, and Ishman Bracey. In addition, Jackson was the home of the only record company talent scout in the Deep South, H. C. Spiers, who owned a furniture store there and was responsible for most of the authentic Delta blues recorded in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Charley Patton, Willie Brown, Son House, and Tommy Johnson all had their first recording sessions arranged by Spiers.<sup>47</sup>

Johnson was a consummate composer who carefully crafted set guitar accompaniments, personalized lyrics, and fragments of folk poetry into striking blues compositions. "Maggie Campbell," named after a former wife of Johnson's with whom he had a tempestuous relationship, uses the following standard folk verses:

Now sun gon' shine in my back door someday, my back  
door someday,

Sun gon' shine in my back door someday,

And the wind gon' change, gon' blow my blues away.

Now see see rider, see what you done done, now see

what you done done,

You done made me love you, now you trying to put  
me down.<sup>48</sup>

"Big Road Blues," a refashioning of Patton's "Down the Dirt Road Blues," was one of Tommy Johnson's most popular songs. Once again, the theme is freedom of movement—the call of the "big road," which was destined to help launch the African-American exodus out of the Delta in the coming decades.

I ain't goin' down that big road by myself  
(hear me talkin' to you, pretty baby).

### "Everyday Seems Like Murder Here"

I ain't goin' down that big road by myself,  
If I don't take you, I'll take someone else.<sup>49</sup>

Tommy Johnson spent his declining years drifting back and forth between Jackson and Crystal Springs, playing his blues at black social gatherings or in the street for tips. An alcoholic, he would drink Sterno or denatured alcohol in shoe polish when nothing else was available. In his most haunting, autobiographical blues composition, "Canned Heat Blues," he reveals the addiction that was destroying him:

Cryin' canned heat, canned heat, mama, cryin'

Sterno's killin' me,

Cryin' canned heat, mama, Sterno's killin' me,

Takes alcorub to make these canned heat blues.

I woke up this morning with canned heat 'round  
my bed,

Run here somebody, take these canned heat blues,

Run here somebody and take these canned heat blues.<sup>50</sup>

Son House: "Down on the Killing Floor"

While Son House was active on the Delta blues scene, he, like his close friend Willie Brown, was most admired for his guitar style. Where Brown had primarily expanded the rhythmic possibilities of the blues accompaniment in his playing, Son House perfected the sliding bottleneck guitar technique, making it the cornerstone of his sound.

Son House was born in 1902 on a farm close to Lyon, Mississippi, in the heartland of the Delta. He grew up singing church music and only began to play guitar in his late twenties, after hearing a local musician named James McCoy use a bottleneck on the strings of his guitar while playing a blues tune. At that time, the bottleneck was replacing the knifeblade as the device commonly used to produce the distinctive voice-like whining sound. House had spent most of his youth with family in Louisiana and had only recently returned to Lyon, which may explain why he was unfamiliar with this Delta guitar style, even though it was becoming a fixture in the region by the 1920s. In any event, House immediately went out and purchased a second-hand guitar, persuaded McCoy to teach him how to play the blues with a bottleneck, and ended up playing with him at dances and parties.

In 1928, House shot and killed another man at a house party near Lyon. He pleaded self-defense and served two years on Parchman Farm before being paroled in 1930. At that time he began his association with Charley Patton

and Willie Brown. They played together regularly throughout the Delta, and it was Patton who arranged for Son House's first recording session for Paramount Records in Grafton, Wisconsin. House recorded only three of his standard blues numbers at the session—"My Black Mama," "Preachin' Blues," and "Dry Spell Blues"—but since all three were excellent vehicles for his virtuosity with a bottleneck, they helped further his reputation as the Delta's foremost slide guitarist. "My Black Mama" is a Delta standard that was later copied by Robert Johnson as "Walking Blues" and by Muddy Waters as "Country Blues." "Preachin' the Blues" juxtaposes the sacred and the profane. In the first verse, House lampoons the Baptist preacher:

Oh I'm go' get me religion, I'm goin' to join the Baptist church,  
I'm goin' be a Baptist preacher and I sure won't have to work.

Then he focuses on his own dilemma:

Oh I had religion, Lord, to this very day,  
But the women and whiskey, well they would not let me pray.

Finally, he resolves the conflict by exclaiming: "I swear to God I've got to preach these gospel blues."<sup>51</sup> "Dry Spell Blues," the most original of the three, is a powerful portrayal of the rural poverty in the region:

The dry spell blues are falling, drove me from door to door,  
Dry spell blues are falling, drove me from door to door,  
The dry spell blues have put everybody on the killing floor.

Now the people down South soon won't have no home,  
Lord, it's the people down South soon won't have no home,  
'Cause this dry spell has parched all their cotton and corn.

Pork chops forty-five cents a pound, cotton only ten,  
Pork chops forty-five cents a pound, cotton only ten,  
Can't keep no women, no, no, not one of them.

So dry old boll weevil turn up his toes and die,  
So dry old boll weevil turn up his toes and die,  
Now ain't nothing to do but bootleg moonshine and rye.<sup>52</sup>

Son House remained an active Delta bluesman throughout the depression and into the war years. Then, after the death of his close friend Willie Brown, he moved to Rochester, New York, where he retired. The classic Delta bottle-

neck guitar style he was so instrumental in developing had by then become inseparable from the rural blues culture indigenous to the region and would prove to be the seminal influence on the music of younger Mississippi Delta blues giants like Robert Johnson, Bukka White, Muddy Waters, and Elmore James.<sup>53</sup>

Robert Johnson: "Hellhound on My Trail"

Robert Johnson was the key transitional figure working within the Mississippi Delta's blues culture. He bridged the gap between the music's rural beginnings and its modern urban manifestations, but he died before receiving any national recognition. Over the years, both his stature as a Delta blues trailblazer and the legends surrounding his life have grown considerably.

Johnson was born south of the Delta in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, on May 8, 1911. He was raised by his mother, who lived with a series of men and moved around routinely from place to place in the mid-South. While Johnson had close family ties in the Delta, he was also one of its uprooted. He moved from Hazlehurst to the Delta, then to Memphis, and back to the Delta before he reached the age of eight. The rest of his youth was spent at a sharecroppers' settlement called Commerce on Richard Leatherman's plantation near Robinsonville, Mississippi. He was married when he was nineteen years old, and in less than a year he lost his sixteen-year-old wife in childbirth. He never remarried or settled down again.

Johnson's restless spirit was indicative of the changing social consciousness among the rural black population still living and working in the South. A recurring message at the heart of his blues was epitomized in the line "Travel on, poor Bob, just can't turn you 'round." Johnny Shines, a fellow bluesman and traveling companion of Johnson's, said of him: "People might consider him wild because he didn't think nothing of just taking off from wherever he was, just pack up and go. He had that about traveling."<sup>54</sup> Johnson spent time in Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, Dallas, San Antonio, and Helena, Arkansas, but he was always drawn back to the region he was obsessed with leaving. He was murdered in the Delta town of Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1938. He was twenty-seven.<sup>55</sup>

Robert Johnson started out in the blues as a skinny teenager who "blew a pretty good harp" (short for harmonica) at the local Saturday night dances around Robinsonville. Here he met Charley Patton, Willie Brown, and Son House, who got him interested in the guitar. He was particularly keen on Son House's bottleneck slide technique, which he made the centerpiece of his own playing style, but his musical tastes ventured beyond the Delta tradition. His guitar work was also influenced by the recordings of Kokomo Arnold, Scrapper Blackwell, Willie Newbern, and Lonnie Johnson, who also influenced

many of his vocal inflections, along with Leroy Carr, Peetie Wheatstraw, and Skip James. Johnny Shines recalled that Robert Johnson had a sensitive ear and that he listened to music from many different sources:

Robert didn't just perform his own songs. He did anything that he heard over the radio. ANYTHING that he heard. When I say anything, I mean ANYTHING—popular songs, ballads, blues, anything. It didn't make him no difference what it was. If he liked it, he did it. He'd be sitting there listening to the radio—and you wouldn't even know he was paying any attention to it—and later that evening maybe, he'd walk out on the streets and play the same songs that were played over the radio. Four or five songs he'd liked out of the whole session over the radio and he'd play them all evening, and he'd continue to play them.<sup>56</sup>

In the mid-thirties, Johnson spent time with Esther Lockwood in Helena, Arkansas, and taught her son, Robert Jr. Lockwood, to play the guitar. Lockwood's impressions of Johnson echoed those of Johnny Shines and most of the other musicians who knew him:

Robert was a strange dude, I guess you could say he was a loner and a drifter. . . . He could pick a song right out of the air. He'd hear it being played by someone or on the radio and play it right back note for note. He could do it with blues, spirituals, hillbilly music, popular stuff. You name it, he could play it. . . . Then I heard he was poisoned by some jealous woman in Greenwood. Sonny Boy was runnin' with him at the time. He said Robert drank some whiskey that had been poisoned and he fell out. Crawled on the floor and howled like a dog before he died. It was a sad day when we heard the news. Robert was a good guy and a hell of a blues musician. He sure could play.<sup>57</sup>

Don Law, the record producer for Johnson's recording session in San Antonio, was particularly impressed with Johnson's dexterity with a guitar—his touch and hands astounded him: "He had the most beautiful hands I've ever seen—long slender fingers."<sup>58</sup>

Robert Johnson's only recording sessions were held in San Antonio late in 1936 and then in Dallas early in 1937; he recorded a total of twenty-nine blues selections. In San Antonio he was arrested for vagrancy. While he was in jail he was beaten by the police and his guitar was broken. Don Law bailed him out of jail.

The impact of Johnson's guitar style would be far-reaching. As blues historian Samuel Charters puts it:

## 'Everyday Seems Like Murder Here'

As a guitarist he almost completely turned the blues around. His tightening of the rhythmic line was the basis for the instrumental blues scene that followed him in Chicago—letting the upper strings play a free melodic part, but using the thumb for a hard rhythm in the lower strings that was almost like a drum part. When Muddy Waters started his first bands in Chicago six or seven years later all he had to do was have the bass player and the drummer pick up on the treble. Elmore James took less from Robert, but his various versions of "Dust My Broom," and all the other versions he did of the same melody with different words, caught the rough excitement of one part of Robert's style.<sup>59</sup>

Blues scholar Robert Palmer comments:

He made the instrument [guitar] sound uncannily like a full band, furnishing a heavy beat with his feet, chording innovative shuffle rhythms and picking out high treble-string lead with his slider, all at the same time. Fellow guitarists would watch him with unabashed, open mouth wonder. They were watching the Delta's first modern bluesman at work.<sup>60</sup>

Robert Johnson's recordings are either blues borrowed from other sources or his own compositions, which tend to be the more poetic. In the former category are selections such as "Walking Blues," a tune that borrows its melody and guitar accompaniment from Son House's "My Black Mama." "Sweet Home Chicago" is copied from both "My Black Mama" and Kokomo Arnold's "Old Original Kokomo Blues," while "32-20 Blues" is based on Skip James's "20-20 Blues." "If I Had Possession over Judgment Day" and "Traveling Riverside Blues" both use the traditional "rolling and tumbling" tune family or blues core first recorded by Willie Newbern as "Roll and Tumble Blues" in 1929; it is directly related to "Brownsville Blues," which was initially recorded by Sleepy John Estes, also in 1929. Basically, a blues core of this nature is a constellation of lyrics, melody, and guitar parts that can be used interchangeably. The "rolling and tumbling" blues core was a well-known favorite both in Memphis and in the Delta.<sup>61</sup>

Johnson also recorded a number of blues selections that are strikingly original, including "Hellhound on My Trail":

I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving,  
Blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail,  
Ummm blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail,  
And the day keeps on reminding me there's a hellhound on my trail,  
Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail.<sup>62</sup>

Leaving and painful separation are the themes of his poignant "Love in Vain":

I followed her to the station with her suitcase in my hand,  
 And I followed her to the station with her suitcase in my hand,  
 Well it's hard to tell, it's hard to tell when all your love's in vain,  
 All my love's in vain.

When the train rolled up to the station, I looked her in the eye,  
 When the train rolled up to the station, I looked her in the eye,  
 Well I was lonesome, felt so lonesome and I could not help but cry,  
 All my love's in vain.

When the train left the station with two lights on behind,  
 When the train left the station with two lights on behind,  
 Well the blue light was my blues and the red light was my mind,  
 All my love's in vain.<sup>63</sup>

In songs like "Milkcow's Calf Blues" and "Traveling Riverside Blues," Johnson made erotic love the dialectical counterpoint to unrequited love and developed clever double entendres with obvious delight. In "Terraplane Blues," the sexual metaphor is extended to the mechanics of the automobile:

I'm goin' to get deep down in this connection, keep on  
 tangling with your wire,  
 I'm goin' get deep down in this connection, uum keep  
 tangling with your wires,  
 And when I mash down on your starter,  
 your spark plug will give me power.<sup>64</sup>

The social themes and images that dominate the landscape of Robert Johnson's songs are representative of those found in early rural blues in the Delta and throughout the cotton belt. Their mixture of personal observations and folklore proved to be instrumental in updating and invigorating the black oral tradition in the region. In blues like "Walking Blues," "Rambling on My Mind," "Dust My Broom," and "Sweet Home Chicago," he used mobility as a metaphor for personal freedom. Two verses from Johnson's "Preaching Blues" alludes to the bleak situation, that is "the blues," that made flight so urgent:

And the blues fell mama child and they tore me all upside down,  
 Blues fell mama child and they tore me upside down,  
 Travel on, poor Bob, just can't turn you 'round.

Well the blues is a achin' old heart disease (Do it with you,  
 gonna do it),  
 The blues is a low down achin' heart disease,  
 Like consumption, killin' me by degrees.<sup>65</sup>

In tandem with Robert Johnson's obsession with freedom of movement at any cost is his fatalistic assessment of the forces arrayed against him—both social and supernatural. He expresses that fatalism most eloquently in "Hellhound on My Trail" and in "Crossroad Blues," a song that simultaneously evokes the terror of the Delta social order as experienced by African Americans relegated to its lowest echelons and the spirit of Legba, the Yoruban god associated with the crossroads. In Yoruban folklore, a crossroads symbolizes the junction between the physical and the spiritual worlds, the human and the divine, where mortals sought out the god Legba in order to learn their fate:

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knee,  
 Went to the crossroad, fell down on my knee,  
 Asked the Lord above to have mercy, save poor Bob if you please.

Uumh, standing at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride,  
 Standing at the crossroads, I tried to flag a ride,  
 Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody passed me by.

Uumh, the sun going down, boy, dark gonna catch me here,  
 Uumh, dark gonna catch me here.  
 I haven't got no loving sweet woman that loves and feels my care.

You can run, you can run, tell my friend, poor Willie Brown,  
 You can run, tell my friend, poor Willie Brown,  
 Lord, that I'm standing at the crossroad, babe, I believe I'm  
 sinking down.<sup>66</sup>

In many respects, Robert Johnson's flirtations with the Devil are an extension of the fatalism implicit in his philosophy. Like Tommy Johnson, he is known to have encouraged the legend that he had made a pact with Satan:

Early this morning when you knocked on my door,  
 Early this morning, uumh, when you knocked on my door,  
 I said, "Hello Satan, I believe it's time to go."

Me and the Devil was walking side by side,  
 Me and the Devil was walking side by side,  
 I'm going to beat my women until I get satisfied  
 (now baby, you know you ain't doing me right).

You may bury my body down by the highway side  
 (baby, I don't care where you bury my body when I'm dead  
 and gone).

You may bury my body, down by the highway side,  
 So my old evil spirit can get a Greyhound bus and ride.<sup>67</sup>

Johnson's fatalism implies a capitulation to overwhelming social constraints: he makes a deal with Satan because he has nothing to lose. But there is also an element of defiance in this pact with the forces of darkness, a defiance of the dominant white culture that enforces its social constraints with the help of its official religion, Christianity. It is also important to note that the Devil is the ultimate trickster figure in Johnson's blues, a reincarnation of Legba at a Delta crossroads. Once again, cultural resistance is made manifest in the use of an African icon, here disguised as Satan, to reaffirm African custom and tradition.

### Telling It Like It Was

The harsh and foreboding nature of Robert Johnson's blues compositions—their condensed rage mixed in with gloom and apocalyptic doom—stems from his experiences growing up in the Mississippi Delta, becoming a male adult in a social environment that denied him his manhood. When Johnson composed his songs, the region was still a backward, almost feudal, agricultural stronghold dominated by a small group of wealthy white plantation owners and merchants. The black population continued to outnumber the white population by nearly four to one, and African Americans remained confined to the Delta's lowest social stratum. Barred from voting and from holding public office, they were denied their basic civil rights and often were deprived of legal rights as well. Rigidly segregated from whites, they had limited access to public education and health care. Moreover, the living conditions for African Americans in the Delta were crude and often unsanitary. Their homes lacked plumbing and electricity; their diets lacked nourishing foods. As a result, the death and disease rates for African Americans residing in the region before World War II were much higher than those of the white population.<sup>68</sup>

White supremacy in the Delta was maintained by subjecting the black population to repressive social practices such as curfews and cross burnings and to the constant threat of violent acts such as beatings and lynchings. The level of violence in the region remained high in comparison to the national norm. After World War I, the violence escalated and frequently pitted black war veterans against white vigilantes. African Americans who had fought to "end war" were not inclined to endure unfair treatment at home. In the early 1920s, for example, near Drew, Mississippi, not far from Dockery's plantation, a black veteran killed a white plantation owner he worked for in a dispute over money. He was pursued by a white posse and killed four of them before being captured, paraded through the streets of Drew, and then lynched in public.<sup>69</sup> Robert Johnson, Son House, Tommy Johnson, Willie Brown, Charley Patton, and several other Delta blues pioneers were living and playing in the midst of continual violence and could not remain untouched by it. Johnson was poisoned to death, House killed a man in a gun fight, and Patton was cut badly on his neck in a knife fight.

Like the living conditions in the Delta, the working conditions were also fraught with peril and hardship. The cotton plantations were the major source of employment for black workers in the Delta, but the region was also notorious for its levee contract labor system. The levee construction along the Mississippi River and its tributaries was the only line of defense against the periodic floods that imperiled the entire river basin. After the Civil War, the task of maintaining, extending, and upgrading the levee system was taken over by the federal government, which hired contractors to do the job. These white contractors leased convicts, most of whom were African Americans, to do the grueling manual labor necessary to keep the levees intact. After the turn of the century, this convict lease system was gradually abandoned in favor of a new system that proved to be just as invidious. The local labor contractors hired a workforce, once again predominantly black, and set up levee camps near the work sites where the laborers were billeted. Discipline was enforced by armed guards called "strawbosses" on the job and "shack bullies" in the camps. In addition, the workers were charged exorbitant fees for their food, water, clothing, shelter, and recreation. As a result, they invariably owed the contractors more than they were getting paid. This system of peonage was remarkably similar to the system that already existed on the Delta's cotton plantations. Black workers performed back-breaking labor from sunup to sundown, lived in squalid and unsanitary facilities, and were perpetually in debt to the labor contractors or plantation owners.<sup>70</sup>

By the 1930s, there were sixty-five federally funded levee camps along the Mississippi River; most of these were in the Delta region. In an article titled "Mississippi Slavery in 1933," published in the NAACP journal, *Crisis*, Roy Wilkins described the plight of the black levee workers in detail after investi-

gating the situation first hand. He made note of the low wages ("\$1.00 a day for common laborers"), the long working hours (from twelve to eighteen hours a day), the poor working conditions, and the built-in pay deductions. Wilkins also indicated that many of the labor contractors apparently failed to pay workers the agreed-upon wage: "The men grumble over small pay, the long hours, the cursing, the beating, the food, the tents, the commissary fleecing, but they reserve their greatest bitterness for the contractor who 'won't pay you even that little you got coming.'" <sup>71</sup>

Many Delta blues musicians worked on the levees and in the levee camps entertaining the workers confined there on the weekends. Their musical repertoire usually included popular folk blues like "Levee Camp Moan" and "Shack Bully Stomp," which registered the black workforce's collective protest against the levee contractors and their hired thugs. Big Bill Broonzy, Peter Chatman (also known as Memphis Slim), and Big Joe Williams all worked for the infamous Lowrance brothers, a large family of levee contractors reputed to have operated the biggest and most brutal levee camps in the region. As Memphis Slim remembered them:

They was seven or eight of them Lowrences and they was all mean, but that Charlie Lowrance was the worst one I ever knowed. Would work a man to death and pay it no mind. Work you from can see to can't see—you know from time the sun come up until it went down. You couldn't say you was tired and wanted a break 'cause they'd crack you upside your head with a club. Them straw bosses would beat you dead. Mister Charlie say, "Kill a nigger, hire another. But kill a mule you got to buy another." You see they treated a mule better than a Negro back then in those camps. They was bad mens those Lowrance and they all got rich. <sup>72</sup>

Big Joe Williams described life in a Greenville, Mississippi, levee camp run by "Captain Charlie Lowrance" as follows:

We worked until there wasn't no more light, and we would start at day-break—long hours and you only made a dollar a day, dollar fifty for mule skimmers. The straw boss had a club and a gun. He'd beat you if you tried to rest a bit. We slept in old tents on filthy mattresses. The lice and mosquitos eat you up. Food was just as rotten and there wasn't much of it. It was a tough life on that levee, man. <sup>73</sup>

Williams later recorded "Levee Camp Blues," which he said was based on his levee work experience. It goes, in part:

### "Everyday Seems Like Murder Here"

Yea, I been workin' on the levee, I been workin' night and day,  
Yea, I been workin' on the levee, oh, I been workin' night and day,  
That's somewhere around Greenville, Mississippi.

Yes every Saturday night I went to Clarksdale, Mississippi,  
Charlie Lowrance tell me, Big Joe Williams, you ain't got no pay.

My lead mule crippled and my off mule blind,  
My lead mule crippled and my off mule blind,  
How can I drive here buddy, when I ain't got me a loaded nine?  
Bring me a loaded nine.

I ain't gonna work both night and day,  
I hate to tell you, Captain Charlie,  
I ain't gonna work both night and day,  
I can't help you build your levee, oh well,  
And you won't give me no pay. <sup>74</sup>

Sunnyland Slim also worked as a muleskinner—a teamster who drove the mules used to haul the dirt and rocks to the levees for fill. Like Big Joe Williams, he used a "loaded nine" tail whip on the animals:

Yea I worked as a muleskinner down on them levees around Memphis and Arkansas. Boss man had me out there all day in that hot sun drivin' that ole mule. Had me a team of old worn-out mules at first. But I drive 'em best I could. Use the whip on 'em and I'd sing too. "Well good morning captain, my mule is tired and slow, what time is it captain, quittin' time for sure." Sing those little ole things for the boss man 'cause he liked to hear that. Liked his boys to sing. Them were hard times, only rough mens could work on them levees. Had to be 'cause you could get yourself killed if you weren't. <sup>75</sup>

When there was periodic flooding in the Mississippi Delta basin, local black residents were often pressed into labor gangs. The gangs worked around the clock to shore up the levees in order to save the cotton crop. Work camps with armed guards, often called "relief camps," were set up to coordinate and control the efforts of the illegally conscripted black labor force. Those who refused to work without compensation were denied emergency relief supplies and shelter provided by the Red Cross; sometimes, they were also beaten or jailed. The worst incident of this kind occurred during the famous 1927 Mississippi River flood. Thousands of homeless black farm workers were lured into government-sponsored Red Cross camps near Greenville, Vicksburg, and



Yazoo City, held there against their will, charged for the relief services, and pressed into forced-labor gangs to clean up after the flood.

Constant exploitation and humiliation eventually helped to provoke a full-scale black exodus from the Delta's fertile farmlands. The African-American population in the region began to decline slowly for the first time ever in the 1920s and would continue to do so at an accelerated pace for the next three decades.<sup>76</sup>

It was the economic dynamics of the plantation system in the Delta, however, that necessitated black migration. Sharecropping and its variations—share-renting and land-renting—all led to debt and dependency on the plantation owners. Very few African-American tenant farmers were able to get far enough ahead to buy their own land. Sociologist Hortense Powderhouse's study of the Delta region around Indianola, Mississippi, completed in 1932, estimated that at least 70 percent of the black tenant families living there were cheated by their landlords. Only 17 to 18 percent made even a slender profit from their labors. On the average, the African-American families she surveyed moved every other year. It was common knowledge that the only way to get out of debt to the plantation owner was "to walk out."<sup>77</sup>

In the forefront of this migration were many of Mississippi's finest blues musicians, whose music often encouraged the exodus. Henry Sloan, Joe Hicks, Frank Stokes, Furry Lewis, Gus Cannon, Jim Jackson, J. D. Short, Big Joe Williams, and Big Bill Broonzy all had abandoned the state for points north by the 1920s. During the depression and the war years, they were followed by Robert Johnson, Howling Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Tommy McClennan, Bukka White, Big Boy Crudup, Sunnyland Slim, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and many others who were not as well known. These migratory Mississippi bluesmen were eventually responsible for focusing national attention on their music and fusing it with the emerging urban blues cultures in the midwestern industrial centers.

Many other Mississippi Delta blues musicians who were standouts and acknowledged as critical to the Delta blues culture in its formative years stayed in the Delta and were never recorded. Only their names and reputations survive: Josie Bush; Charley Patton's mentor, Henry Sloan; Son House's bottleneck slide guitar instructor, Willie Wilson; and Gus Cannon's slide guitar teacher, Alex Lee, belong to that community of musicians who are remembered but whose contributions are now difficult to assess. We know more about others who remained in the general region and managed to make a few commercial recordings in the late twenties and early thirties—Skip James, Mississippi John Hurt, William Harris, Sam Collins, Ruben Lacey, King Solomon Hill, Kid Bailey, Joe Reynolds, Garfield Akers, and Roosevelt Graves. For these men and women, who had little formal education and who made their livings as farm workers, music was a leisure-time activity, but they were also creative

musicians who developed individual blues styles and repertoires with minimal outside help. Inspired by the indigenous Delta blues culture, they drew upon various elements of the Delta style—the bottleneck slide technique, percussive instrumental techniques, a heavy emphasis on drawing out individual notes, intensely passionate vocals, and the use of falsetto, moaning, and ostinato. With their help, the Delta blues matured, but the migrants were ultimately responsible for carrying the music to areas where it would be transformed and would itself transform popular American music in the postwar decades.

28. *Negro Prison Camp Songs*, Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4475.
29. Frances Ann Kemble, *Journal of a Resident on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York: Harper, 1863), p. 128. Also see Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music in the U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 81-85, and Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, pp. 161-83, for discussions of cries, calls, and hollers during slavery.
30. Son House, quoted in Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen* (New York: Oak, 1967), p. 7.
31. Interview with Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins by Samuel Charters, *My Life in the Blues*, Prestige PR 7370.
32. Interview with Sonny Terry by the author, Washington, D.C., Mar. 1982.
33. Translation quoted in Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music*, p. 169.
34. Henry Spalding, ed., *Encyclopedia of Black Folklore and Humor* (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David, 1972), pp. 236-37.
35. Richard Dorson, "The Career of John Henry," *Western Folklore* 24 (1965): 155-63.
36. See Levine, *Black Culture*, pp. 410-11.
37. Reprinted in Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 626. Also see H. C. Bearly, "Bad Nigger," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 38 (Jan. 1939):75. See Bearly's discussion of this folk type, pp. 71-81.
38. See Eric Hobsbawn, *Primitive Rebels* (New York: Dell, 1966) and *Bandits* (New York: Dell, 1969), for a discussion of social banditry.
39. See John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folksongs* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 112-17, for examples of this ballad.
40. W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 79.
41. John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Negro Songs as Sung by Leadbelly* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), pp. 108-10.
42. Alan Lomax, notes to 15A, "The Gray Goose," *Afro-American Spirituals, Worksongs, and Ballads*, Library of Congress Recording AAFS L3.

### Chapter 2: "Everyday Seems Like Murder Here": Mississippi Delta Blues

1. See Charles Johnson, "The Negro Migration: An Economic Interpretation," *Modern Quarterly* 14 (1934):314-25. Also see Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1976), pp. 20-34, for a discussion and for specific figures on the migration of the black population during this period.
2. Richard A. Easterlin, "Regional Income Trends, 1840-1950," in Jesse Lemisch, ed., *The Reinterpretation of American History* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 140.
3. See Charles Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago

- Press, 1934); John Ray Skates, *Mississippi: A History* (New York: Norton, 1979); and Harry Ashmore, *Arkansas: A History* (New York: Norton, 1978).
4. Interview with Sunnyland Slim (Albert Luandrew) by the author, Washington, D.C., Apr. 1977.
5. Muddy Waters, quoted in A. X. Nicholas, ed., *Woke Up This Mornin': The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 99.
6. Charles Peabody, "Notes on Negro Music," *Journal of American Folklore* 16 (1903):148-52.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
12. Howard W. Odum, "Folk Song and Folk Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," *Journal of American Folklore* 24 (1911):255-94.
13. Quoted in Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance in the U.S. from 1619 to 1970* (Palo Alto, Calif.: National Press, 1972), p. 104.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Interview with Sam Chatmon by the author, Santa Cruz, Calif., Apr. 1973. The Chatmon brothers made a number of race records and played for dances in the Delta-Jackson region of Mississippi. The most prominent members of the group were Lonnie Chatmon, an excellent fiddle player, Bo Carter, a half-brother who played guitar and also made a number of solo recordings, and Sam Chatmon, who was the last surviving member of the Mississippi Sheiks. Also see Harry Oster, *Living Country Blues* (Detroit: Folklore Associates, 1969), p. 8; W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 5-6.
16. David Evans, "Afro-American One Stringed Instruments," *Western Folklore* 29 (1970):29-45. Also see William Ferris, *Blues from the Delta* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), pp. 37-39, and Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), pp. 84-88, for discussions on the influence of one-string instruments on the early rural blues.
17. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, p. 78.
18. Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking, 1981), p. 46.
19. Big Bill Broonzy, "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad," and "Mindin' My Own Business" on *The Big Bill Broonzy Story*, vol. 1, Verve Records U-300-5.
20. Big Bill Broonzy, "Joe Turner Blues," *Broonzy Story*, vol. 1.
21. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, pp. 151-53.
22. David Evans, "Charley Patton: Conscience of the Delta," in *The Voice of the Delta*: Charley Patton, ed. Robert Sacre (Liege, Belgium: Presses Universitaires, 1987), pp. 111-220.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 125-31.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-33. Also see Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 44-56.
25. Evans, "Charley Patton," pp. 140-41; David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 169-74; Jeff Titon, *Early Downhome Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 7.

26. Hayes McMullen, quoted in Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 48.
27. Charley Patton, "Elder Green Blues," on *Charley Patton: King of the Delta Blues*, Yazoo L-1020. Most of Patton's recordings, made between 1929 and 1934, have been reissued on *Charley Patton*, Origin Jazz Library OJL6, OJL7, and *Charley Patton: King of the Delta Blues*.
28. Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 64.
29. The four "voices" can be heard on Charley Patton, "Spoonful Blues," on *Charley Patton: King*.
30. Cited by Evans in "Charley Patton," p. 139.
31. For a complete discography of Charley Patton's recordings, see John Fahey, *Charley Patton* (London: Studio Vista, 1970).
32. Evans, "Charley Patton," p. 175.
33. Charley Patton, "Pony Blues," on *Charley Patton: King*.
34. Charley Patton, "High Sheriff Blues," *ibid.*
35. Charley Patton, "Down the Dirt Road Blues," *ibid.*
36. Charley Patton, "34 Blues," *ibid.*
37. Charley Patton, "Revenue Man Blues," *ibid.*
38. Evans, "Charley Patton," pp. 184-87.
39. Charley Patton, "Tom Rushing Blues," on *Charley Patton: King*.
40. Charley Patton, "Mean Black Moan," on *Charley Patton*, OJL7.
41. Evans, "Charley Patton," p. 192.
42. Charley Patton, "High Water Everywhere," on *Charley Patton: King*.
43. Evans, "Charley Patton," pp. 170-72. Also see Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen* (New York: Oak, 1967), pp. 34-56, and Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 48-89, for additional discussions of Charley Patton's life and music.
44. See Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 112-14.
45. Evans, *Big Road Blues*, pp. 176, 194; also Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 79, 82-84.
46. Interview with Houston Stackhouse by Jim O'Neal, *Living Blues* 17 (Summer 1974):20-21.
47. Chatmon interview, Apr. 1973. Also see Charters, *The Bluesmen*, pp. 129-39.
48. Tommy Johnson, "Maggie Campbell," on *The Famous 1928 Tommy Johnson! Ishman Bracey Sessions*, Roots RL-330.
49. Tommy Johnson, "Big Road Blues," *ibid.*
50. Tommy Johnson, "Canned Heat Blues," *ibid.*
51. Son House, "Preachin' the Blues," on *The Legendary Son House: Father of Folk Blues*, Columbia CL 2417.
52. Son House, "Dry Spell Blues," *ibid.*
53. See Charters, *The Bluesmen*, pp. 57-70. Also interview with Son House by Julius Lester, *Sing Out: The Folksong Magazine* 15, no. 3 (1965):38-45, and by Jeff Titon, *Living Blues* 13 (Apr.-May 1977):14-22.
54. Interview with Johnny Shines by Pete Welding, *Living Blues* 22 (July-Aug. 1975):28-32.
55. See Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 111-31; Samuel Charters, *Robert Johnson* (New York: Oak, 1973); and Alan Greenberg, *Love in Vain: The Life and Legend of Robert Johnson* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983).

56. Welding, Shines interview, p. 29.
57. Interview with Robert Jr. Lockwood by the author, Washington, D.C., Apr. 1977.
58. Charters, *Robert Johnson*, pp. 14-15.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
60. Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 117.
61. Charters, *Robert Johnson*, pp. 11-25.
62. Robert Johnson, "Hellhound on My Trail," on *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers*, Columbia CL 1654.
63. Robert Johnson, "Love in Vain," on *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers*, Columbia CL 30034.
64. Robert Johnson, "Terraplane Blues," *ibid.*
65. Robert Johnson, "Preaching Blues," *ibid.*
66. Robert Johnson, "Crossroad Blues," *ibid.*
67. Robert Johnson, "Me and the Devil Blues," *ibid.*
68. See Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: The New African Culture* (New York: Grove, 1961), p. 42. Also see Evans, *Big Road Blues*, p. 115.
69. Late in 1923, a black veteran named Joe Pullen had a dispute with his landlord, W. T. Saunders, over payment for his work as a sharecropper. Pullen felt he was being cheated. The confrontation led to a gun fight. Saunders was killed, and Pullen fled to a nearby swamp with his rifle and ammunition. A white posse estimated to have numbered close to a thousand men at its zenith descended on the area with an arsenal of rifles and machine guns. Gasoline was dumped into the swamp and set afire. Joe Pullen was eventually wounded by the posse, then captured, dragged through the streets of Drew by a mob, and lynched. According to the official body count, Pullen managed to kill four members of the posse and wound eight others; black sources in the area maintained that his marksmanship accounted for nineteen dead and forty wounded. The city of Drew responded to the incident by instituting a dusk-to-dawn curfew. See Evans, *Big Road Blues*, pp. 190-93.
- A decade later, in nearby Cleveland, Mississippi, a deranged black man who murdered a white family was captured and put on trial. In order to prevent another public lynching, the governor called in the National Guard. The prisoner was convicted of murder and hanged legally. See Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 89-92.
70. See John Cowley, "Shack Bullies and Levee Contractors: Black Protest Songs and Oral History," *Juke Blues* 3 (Dec. 1985):9-15.
71. Roy Wilkins, "Mississippi Slavery in 1933," *Crisis* 40, no. 4 (Apr. 1933): 81-82.
72. Interview with Peter Chatman by the author, Memphis, Sept. 1982.
73. Interview with Big Joe Williams by the author, Memphis, Nov. 1982.
74. Big Joe Williams, "Levee Camp Blues," on *Big Joe Sings the Blues*, Bluesville BVL P 1083.
75. Interview with Albert Luandrew by the author, Chicago, Aug. 1979.
76. John Van Deusen, *The Black Man in White America* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1944), p. 158.
77. Hortense Powderhouse, *After Freedom* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), pp. 86-87.