Devil Got My Woman
Blues at Newport 1966
featuring
Skip James
Howlin' Wolf
Rev. Pearly Brown
Son House
Bukka White
“The mighty river of the blues uncoils in the ear of the planet...African-American singers and dancers made an aesthetic conquest of their environment in the New World...Now that people everywhere begin to taste the bitterness of the post-industrial period, the Delta blues have found a world audience.” – Alan Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began, Pantheon Books, New York, 1993

Something funny happened to the blues on the way to the millennium. As a genre, it had spent much of its century of existence being linked with such modifiers as ‘lowdown’ (‘lowdown, dirty blues’). But a few years ago, those modifiers fell away like vestigial limbs as the blues suddenly found itself embraced in company which would never have ventured near a Delta juke joint. The world was put on notice that the blues had moved to another plateau when, at George Bush’s 1989 Inaugural gala, Bush’s pit bull campaign manager, Lee Atwater, cranked up an amp and a Fender and wailed in earnest Stevie Ray Vaughn imitation, bringing Albert Collins (a native of Bush’s adoptive state, Texas) aboard for a reality check.
For Collins, Willie Dixon and other blues performers at the event, the Bush Inaugural was just a very high-profile gig and hence good PR. The issue of being used by a faux Blues Brother infamous for the Willie Horton ad campaign probably never came up. The irony, however, was not lost on anyone aware of both Bush’s social agenda and the long-held perception of blues as ‘people’s music’ (and slightly scurrilous ‘people’s music’ at that). Blues tended not to play the White House, and when something like blues did (Josh White’s appearances at both the Roosevelt and Kennedy White Houses come to mind), it was before socially-progressive Administrations. At least that had been the case prior to 1989. By then, something had apparently changed: was it the music itself, or a segment of the music’s audience?

Perhaps both, though the music of Robert Johnson never changed: it was still the same in 1990 as it had been when it appeared to little fanfare in 1937. But in 1990, Johnson’s name was linked with rock stars (Eric Clapton and Keith Richards) who contributed to his canonization as Ur-rock star (Johnson’s legend, replete with Hellhounds, fast women, a transient life, Faustian bargains and early death, make him the Ur-rock star). The Columbia Roots N’ Blues boxed set, Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings, actually appeared on the Billboard pop album charts and, since its 1990 release, has sold in excess of 900,000 sets worldwide. Pre-War bluesmen don’t make the pop charts everyday, and Johnson’s posthumous stardom was a dramatic indication that the blues had gone from being lowdown, the province of social marginals, to being upscale and marketable to demographic desirables.

Since Lee Atwater fired the opening volley in the latest blues revival back in 1989, there has been a proliferation of blues-related enterprises in both the private and public sectors. The U.S. Postal Service put out a series of blues commemorative stamps in 1994. The state of Mississippi, as well as the cities of Memphis and Chicago, are capitalizing on their historic links to the blues, which bring them tourists from around the world. Nationwide, there has been an explosion of local blues societies and blues festivals. Ad campaigns featuring living blues artists (B.B. King being the best-known and most used) and classic blues songs (the Willie Dixon catalogue is frequently tapped)
have become mainstays of both radio and television marketing. Major corporations which would have seen little use for blues a decade ago have made both new and reissued blues recordings a priority (MCA’s use of the Chess catalogue, which it now owns, is the most successful example of this in the reissue field). And corporate entities have sprung up solely to exploit the current interest in blues, often in strangely creative ways: House of Blues, best known for its nationwide chain of clubs, unveiled Muddy Waters’s dislodged log cabin at the Chicago Blues Festival on May 31, 1996. Razed from its site in the Mississippi Delta and rebuilt, the cabin where Waters once lived is now on a promotional tour for House of Blues. A second story, paint and windows have been added to the prosaic ‘shotgun shack,’ along with videoscreens and exhibits related to Waters’s life and career. Following this trend to its logical conclusion, can a Delta Disneyland be far behind, a blues-themed amusement park featuring rides inspired, perhaps, by Robert Johnson songs (‘hang on to the Hellhound!’)?

Anyone whose passion for blues can be carbon dated BB (Before Bush) may share some of the dismay inherent in the above observations. However, it is naive for self-avowed purists to flatly condemn the current commercial success of the blues, especially since some good has come of it for actual blues musicians. MCA, not unaware of its publicity value, has made amends for decades of unpaid royalties to Chess artists. Organizations like the Rhythm &
Blues Foundation and Blues Heaven Foundation have gone far to redress similar grievances. Seeing Mississippi acknowledge and finally champion its blues heritage is laudable, whatever the motives, as is the enthusiastic interaction of blues fans in local blues societies and across the globe via the Internet. (A blues radio programmer recently made a plea for promo copies of blues albums for airplay in Skopje, Macedonia.) The lament that frequently fell from the lips of 1970s-80s blues aficionados, that the music is dying, is seldom heard today. The ‘mainstreaming’ of blues has generated a new confidence and optimism among its enthusiasts. But the transformation of blues into a commercially viable ‘retro’ music has ironic downsides: the association of a Willie Dixon, for example, with a Coca-Cola campaign, or B.B. King with hamburgers. Many will know their music only in those contexts. And there’s an armada of well-meaning white blues performers whose shades, fedoras and retro-kitsch stage uniforms recall the straw boaters, candy-striped shirts and garter armbands of Dixieland revivalists of a generation ago. Is blues becoming a kind of millennial Shriner’s music? Stranger yet are the African-American imitators of white bluesmen, a trend recalling 19th century negro minstrel troupes copying white parodies of black music and manners. Given the distancing from reality inherent in the performances of current blues revivalists and, similarly, the transformation of vintage recordings of music created for Southern juke joints into handsomely-packaged coffee table objects d’art, many of us who found the blues ‘BB’ may be forgiven a hint of nostalgia for the days when the old modifiers – ‘lowdown, dirty’ – still clung to blues.

Those pejorative adjectives might not go down smoothly today, so let’s substitute ‘elemental, earthy’ in their place for the experience of the blues which is DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN. If Muddy’s refurbished cabin is a perfect metaphor for a bogus experience of ‘deep blues’ culture, the footage on this video is its reality-drenched antidote. Shot 30 years ago during the 1966 Newport Folk Festival, DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN is as close as many of us will ever get to experiencing the blues in its ‘natural habitat’ and in the company of some of its great artists.

We can thank Alan Lomax for this document, as we can for so much remarkable documentation of American
roots music. Lomax was at least partly responsible for the earliest recordings of three giants, Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, and Muddy Waters. Texas born, he began accompanying his father, John A. Lomax, on Southern field recording trips while still in his teens, and by the time he first met Pete Seeger in 1935, Lomax was, Seeger recalls, “an enthusiastic young man who loved to sing and make music. He had literally thousands of wonderful songs in the back of his mind.”

The source of those songs was the field recording trips with his father, who had been appointed ‘honorary consultant’ and ex officio director of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress in 1933. Four years later, 22-year-old Alan became ‘assistant in charge,’ a position he held until his 1942 resignation to do field recording for the Office of War Information. During his Library of Congress tenure, Lomax gathered more than 3000 field and studio recordings for the Archive of Folk Song. Of his field recordings, he wrote: “The portable recorder put neglected cultures and silenced people into the communication chain.” The best-known fruits of his labors in blues circles are the first recordings of Muddy Waters (Chess MCACHD-9344, The Complete Plantation Recordings: The Historic 1941-42 Library of Congress Field Recordings) and the only field recordings of Muddy’s mentor, Son House (Travelin’ Man CD 02, The Complete Library of Congress Sessions, 1941-42). These were made in a collaborative effort of the Library of Congress and Fisk University, from which institution John W. Work and Lewis Jones joined Lomax to record “the musical habits of a single Negro Community in the Delta.” If Lomax had done nothing else, his name would still be prominent among important blues recordists for those works. (Lomax’s recollections of those seminal field trips can be found in his book, The Land Where the Blues Began.)

Of course, Lomax did much more, and while blues recording is only a small part of his remarkable career in folk music, it’s one in which he played a significant role over several decades. (For a career overview, see “Alan Lomax: Documenting Folk Music of the World” by Michael Parrish, Sing Out! Vol. 40 No. 3, Nov./Dec. ’95/J an. ’96). In 1946, he recorded Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and John Lee ‘Sonny Boy’ Williamson frankly recalling the bru-
tality of Southern segregation and interspersing their memories with music in a one-of-a-kind document, Blues in the Mississippi Night (Rykodisc 90155 CD/CS). As a kind of natural blues theater piece for which Lomax provided minimal (but important) direction, it’s an audio antecedent to DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN.

Lomax’s 1959 Southern field recording trips were an attempt to find out just how much of the traditional music he found in such abundance two decades before had weathered the incursions of mass media. (See Atlantic 782496, Sounds of the South, 4-CD set). Along with many performers indebted to records and radio, he turned up the African-rooted fife-and-drum music of Como, Mississippi’s Young family, who would have sounded no less jarring far from the mainstream in 1939 than they did 20 years later. One of the Young’s neighbors, slide guitarist-blues singer Fred McDowell, was another significant discovery of a field trip which took place the year Samuel Charters’s influential book, The Country Blues, was published. The curiosity among urban folk music enthusiasts and jazz collectors for blues was piqued by Charters’s book and the first pre-War blues reissue Lps; 1959 was really the year in which the 1960s blues revival began.

‘Revival’ is a word with religious connotations, and no doubt the aficionados who comprised the vanguard of the
blues revival brought a religious zeal to their love of this music. The first revivalists were record collectors who exchanged rare 78s, then just 30 years old, by the likes of Son House and Charley Patton, passionate voices clouded by biographical mystery and surface noise. They inhabited an auditory netherworld both unbearably harsh and incredibly alluring, one which invited speculation about the men whose voices were trapped, like flies in amber, in dusty miles of frayed grooves. What sort of lives had they led? Were they dead or alive?

Joining the collectors in asking these questions was a handful of young musicians who, inspired by the burgeoning folk revival, commenced exploring the sources of music then recently popularized by the likes of the Kingston Trio. Some found their way to the banjo and bluegrass and others looked to the guitar and blues. In either case, theirs was a mission of discovery which would bring them into contact with cultures quite dissimilar from that in which they were raised. “The blues revival was a white, middle-class love affair with the music and lifestyle of marginal blacks,” writes Jeff Todd Titon in “Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival” (Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined, Neil V. Rosenberg, ed., University of Illinois Press, 1993, Chicago). “It appealed to people who came out of the intellectual wasteland of the Eisenhower era, the age of the ‘organization man,’ the other-directed conformists who made up the ‘lonely crowd.’
Rejecting conformity to middle-class values, blues revivalists embraced the music of people who seemed unbound by conventions...

At first, ‘unbound’ blues role models were scarce. New Yorkers had Rev. Gary Davis and the duo of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, a team which, along with Odetta and Barbara Dane, had represented blues at the first Newport Folk Festival in 1959. But what of those mysterious voices on pre-War 78s? They seemed relics of a world long gone, yet logic suggested that at least some, had they been young men when they recorded, might still be living 30 years later. A few bold sleuths in the collector-musician coterie undertook ferreting out any survivors. The first important pre-War bluesman to be rediscovered was John Hurt, whose 1928 Okeh label recordings were gentle gems and whose guitar style and voice were little changed by time. Hurt’s 1963 rediscovery caused a sensation and fueled the search for more of his contemporaries. Time had not been so kind to all of them, but there was an authentic frankness in these men and their music which somehow transcended the toll taken by age, infirmity or alcohol, just as the vibrant recorded performances which first attracted the revivalists to them cut through the noisy crud on old 78s.

By 1966, there had already been three summers of extraordinary blues rediscoveries at the Newport Folk Festival. Son House, Skip James, and Bukka White, among others, had made tangible a music which, only a few years prior, existed only in the realm of ghosts. It was an impressive if short-lived resurrection parade: by the time this footage was shot, John Hurt had only months to live, and Skip James, already frail, would see only three more summers. Even the youngest and most robust of these men, Howlin’ Wolf, would last only a decade more. (Son House, ironically, outlived them all.) But in the Summer of 1966 (the year after the ‘Dylan goes electric’ Newport), they gathered at the nation’s leading folk music festival where Alan Lomax, whose contact with some of these men went back to his days of Library of Congress field recordings, filmed them, though not in a conventional ‘concert footage’ context. Lomax aimed instead to recreate the atmosphere of a Delta juke joint, and outfitted a place where several of the musicians were roaming to that end. The musicians re-
sponded with remarkably unself-conscious performances, ones which suggest an apparent lack of concern for the presence of a white man with a camera. We don’t know to what extent Lomax directed the action here, though it would seem to be minimal and, as the alcohol began to flow, his ability to control what was happening was minimized anyway.

There is a stark reality to what we see in this one-of-a-kind blues cinema verité piece where a tipsy Son House banters with Wolf in a way which is completely natural. What makes this footage so compelling is its insistence that these ‘legends’ were, in truth, quite ordinary men whose ordinary interaction with one another is itself extraordinary to witness. It captures the blues not simply ‘in performance’ but also ‘in life,’ expressive of the rhythms of the lives led by its people. “The blues,” Lomax has written, “has always been a state of being as well as a way of singing.” This long-unseen footage is now nearly as old as Son House’s Paramount 78s were at the time of his rediscovery, but there is in it a Here and Now immediacy which reminds us of what was so unnervingly exciting, raw and real about this music at its emotional core long before it was given the shrinkwrapped kiss of corporate America.
“The heart of man is the place the Devil dwells in: I feel sometimes a Hell within myself.” – Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici

“His style was one of the most distinctive to come out of the Delta, and it was dominated by an intense lyricism that shaped every element of the music.” – Samuel B. Charters, The Bluesmen, Oak Publications, 1967

DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN opens with the song’s composer, a man rarely filmed in his brief return to blues performing towards the end of his life. By the time of his 1964 rediscovery, Skip James was a dying man. Ravaged by cancer and slowed by decades of relative musical inactivity, James was no longer the stunning artist responsible for the 18 fabled recordings he made in 1931. Yet he bravely managed to reflect a semblance of that artist, rousing himself to perform his esoteric music and baffling folk audiences with a formality little associated with blues singers. “He was a true genius,” recalls James’s manager, Dick Waterman, “and he knew it. He had a manner toward everyone that was aloof, condescending, and patronizing.” Indeed, James looks somewhat out of place in the company of the other artists here, and while a personal aloofness may be one cause, his musical uniqueness is another. The others stand within a clearly-defined musical con-
tinuum: James is simultaneously a part of yet conspicuously apart from it.

A convincing case has been made for a ‘Bentonia school of Mississippi blues,’ and we are told James learned the rudiments of guitar from Henry Stuckey. Echoes of his music are heard in Jack Owens, discovered by David Evans in the year this footage was shot. James’ friend, Johnny Temple, recorded a version of “Devil Got My Woman” in 1935 and Robert Johnson later refashioned that song into “Hellhound On My Trail.” Yet for all that, Skip James remains a solitary figure in the history of the blues, seemingly without heirs or tangible precedent. Perhaps he preferred it that way.

The bare facts of a biography offer only clues to James’s musical personality. Born on the Woodbine plantation near Bentonia in Yazoo County, Nehemiah Curtis James was an only child who latched onto a guitar at an early age, perhaps nine, and had a few piano lessons in his teens. He left home at age 17 to work on a road construction crew: “I never was into anything too long or deep,” he said. “That’s why I reckon they call me Skip.” In early adulthood James supported himself variously as laborer, pimp, bootlegger and blues performer. His frequent performing partner, Henry Stuckey, had taught him an open E minor guitar tuning (E-B-E-G-B-E) Stuckey may have acquired from Bahamian soldiers while in France during World War I. It served James well on 11 of the 18 songs he recorded in Grafton, Wisconsin for the Paramount label in February 1931.

Only five years earlier, Paramount had launched the vogue for guitar-accompanied blues singers with Blind Lemon Jefferson, whose popularity on record was challenged but never surpassed by the many guitar-playing contenders who trailed in his wake in the pre-Depression era. Like the ‘blues rediscovery’ period 30 years later, the first flush of country blues recording was a short-lived renaissance which unearthed the likes of Charley Patton, Tommy Johnson, Son House, Blind Blake, and a host of other remarkable guitarist-singers. Skip James would be the last in a succession of great blues artists sent North by Jackson, Mississippi record dealer H.C. Spier, de facto Southern talent scout for Paramount. James was recorded in the nick of time, since the economic ravages of the De-
pression were taking a drastic toll of record sales and would soon drive a number of independent labels out of existence. Paramount was among the casualties, and blues recording in general all but ceased in 1932-33.

Appearing as they did on the brink of the label’s collapse, James’s Paramount 78s were pressed in small numbers and only a single copy of some has ever turned up. The rarity of his recordings, coupled with the uncanny nature of the music on them, made James one of the most romanticized pre-War blues figures among collectors prior to his rediscovery. If James’s recordings had appeared a couple of years prior when sales were better, perhaps he would have recorded more than once. However, it’s noteworthy that Paramount recording director Arthur Laibly chose to record 18 songs by a new and unknown artist. Perhaps he was banking on Spier’s assurances that James had a strong local following in the Jackson area, or perhaps he recognized in James something extraordinary and worth recording, whatever the commercial prospects.

It’s hard to imagine those prospects being bright even in boom times, given James’s idiosyncratic music, surely one of the most singular bodies of work in all American vernacular music. The song for which he was best known was also the one he recorded first, “Devil Got My Woman.”

At the time of his Paramount session, James had already been performing this piece, inspired in part by his first marriage, long enough for it to have become his signature song. Asked about its inspiration decades later, James would say: “I came in contact with a companion, and she was so contentious, unruly, and hard to get along with, I just compared her to the devil, one of his agencies. Since doin’ that, I just turned her over to him, and I give her to know that I would rather BE the devil than to be her man, because she was so contentious and I couldn’t get along with her in no way.”

If the Skip James we see here is nowhere near as sure a singer-guitarist as the one who recorded in Wisconsin 35 years prior, there is yet an eerie and mesmeric quality to his performance of “Devil Got My Woman.” Samuel Charters wrote of the song: “It has the looseness and the lonely introspection of a man singing softly to his mule as he plodded behind it in the mud furrow of a spring field.” Certainly the lyrics, with their archaic references (“I’ll cut your
kindling...”), suggest a highly original reworking of traditional material gleaned from the earliest blues and perhaps field hollers. Of James’s guitar style, Charters wrote: “There was often a complex picking style in the upper strings, with a bass pattern that had the somber inevitability of the movement of the sun across the Mississippi sky.”

Unlike the jagged rhythms and propulsive strums characteristic of many Mississippians, James developed a semi-classical right hand approach that utilized the index and middle fingers and facilitated clearly delineated notes. He put this unusual approach to stunning use in “I’m So Glad,” a fingerpicking tour de force which, as a showpiece, has few rivals in early blues recordings. It was based on Lonnie Johnson’s recording, “I’m Tired of Livin’ All Alone,” a jaunty pop-derived performance with none of the ferocious drive James invested in the song. Unfortunately, by the time of his rediscovery James could only approximate the fervor and speed of his 1931 masterpiece. The English rock group, Cream, covered “I’m So Glad,” a tribute which netted James $6,000 in royalties. It was just enough to cover his final hospital and funeral expenses.

The last performance by James here is “Worried Blues,” one of the ‘new’ songs he brought to his rediscovery. It’s a far more conventional blues than any he recorded in 1931, and may reflect what James felt was appropriate fare for his new-found audience. In any event, it suggests that the lack of success of his Paramount recordings discouraged James from coming up with further material of such originality.

After 1931 and prior to 1964, James’s musical activities seem to have been primarily church-related. In 1932, he was reunited with his long-absent preacher father, Rev. Eddie James, and began leading church singing groups. He accompanied gospel quartets on piano and took a turn at preaching himself, though James insisted his subsistence over the years was derived from “a whole lotta hard manual work.” At the time of his rediscovery in the Tunica County Hospital, he was a plantation tractor driver.

The anachronism of Skip James is that of a man who reportedly led a violent early life which may have cost several other men theirs who simultaneously crafted a kind of art music, introspective and almost delicate, of the raw material of the blues. Despite a mentor in Henry Stuckey
and a so-called ‘Bentonia blues school,’ James’s music comes across as largely self-referential. Listening to his peculiar falsetto voice and the modal mood of his accompaniments, one wonders if we aren’t hearing vestiges of Africa and its griot tradition. But like everything else in his music—blues, hillbilly (he recorded a song called “Yola My Blues Away”), and pop influences—those vestiges were filtered through a personal prism which only Skip James could see.

BUKKA WHITE
(1906-1977)

“Let your flesh quiver on your bone...”
– Bukka White, “Baby You’re Killing Me”

“A flood tide of supportive African sociability, eroticism, and life-giving laughter, welling up in black family and community life, endowed black life with a certain invulnerability in the face of sharp adversity.” – Alan Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began

“Yeah, that’s my cousin, Booker White...Booker was the only one of us that ever went into show business...He had a steel bar he would put on his finger, and the sound he’d get from the strings with it would go all through me.” – B.B. King, recalling his cousin Bukka White
If Skip James’s presence is essentially spectral, Bukka White’s engaging earthiness is its antithesis. Yet for all the evident dissimilarities between James and White, they had a couple of things in common. While White, unlike James, had more than one pre-War recording session, both men had one remarkable session which fired the imagination of a later generation of blues researchers and led to their rediscoveries. White’s took place in 1940, and Peter Guralnick has called the dozen songs from it “one of the most emotionally compelling and moving autobiographical bodies of work [in recorded blues].” One of the songs was “Aberdeen Mississippi Blues,” and in the Fall of 1963 a letter figuratively sealed in a bottle tossed in the sea of time was mailed from John Fahey and ED Denson in California to “Bukka White, Old Blues Singer, c/o General Delivery, Aberdeen, Miss.” The chances of it finding its target were slim, but no more so than the chance that John Hurt would be found still living in Avalon, Mississippi, the home he had praised in a 1928 recording. White had settled in Memphis in 1942, but a relative in Aberdeen’s post office forwarded the letter to him. The gregarious White replied to the query and soon the Californians were at his door. White thus became the second major pre-War blues legend to be rediscovered.

The other common bond between White and Skip James was the involvement of John Fahey in both their rediscoveries. The future father of ‘American primitive guitar’ had a far more difficult task in finding James, but, along with Henry Vestine and Bill Barth, did so in June 1964, a tense time for white outsiders to be in Mississippi. Fahey would later incorporate elements of both men’s dissimilar styles into his own eclectic guitar patchworks. And he remembers each of them as contrasting figures: James aloof and suspicious of his rediscoverers; White a garrulous and disarming con artist who essentially sweet-talked Fahey out of a National Duolian, probably the guitar he plays in the performances here. Such guitars, designed in the 1920s as pre-electric amplified instruments with metal resonators, suited White’s ebullient personality. He liked a National, he told Chris Strachwitz, because “it’s loud—I don’t need no mike. And I play so rough I would have busted many guitars. This one can stand rain and punishment. I stomp them, I don’t peddle them!”
Booker T. Washington White’s stompin’ ways began on a farm near Houston, Mississippi. “My father, John White, was a railroad man,” he told Bruce Cook in Listen to the Blues (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1973). “I got the trains from him and I got the music from him, too.” The senior White played both fiddle and guitar, an instrument his son took up at age nine. A boyhood encounter (disputed by some researchers) with Charley Patton inspired White with the ambition to “come to be a great man like Charley Patton.”

White’s infatuation with trains led him to ride freights at an early age, making his way to St. Louis when just 14. The city’s thriving blues scene made a deep impression, and his skill with both guitar and piano earned him the nickname ‘Barrelhouse.’ In Memphis, White recorded 14 sides for Victor in 1930, but only two 78s, one of sacred songs attributed to Washington White, ‘The Singing Preacher,’ were issued from that session. The Depression was taking its toll, though throughout it White hoboed everywhere from the Delta to Buffalo, New York. In Chicago, he met the leading blues recording artists of the day, Tampa Red, Big Bill Broonzy, and others associated with the era’s premier blues A&R man, Lester Melrose. White waxed a hit for Melrose in 1937, “Shake ‘Em On Down.” It reputedly sold in excess of 16,000 copies and was much-covered: Big Bill cut a “New Shake ‘Em On Down” in 1938, at which time White was himself incarcerated at Mississippi’s Parchman Farm.

A shooting incident (White claimed he was ambushed) led to White serving two years in the State Penitentiary, where John A. Lomax recorded him singing “Po’ Boy” and “Sic ‘Em Dogs On” for the Library of Congress in 1939. If Lomax wanted more, White, a hit recording artist during his time in stir, knew enough of commercial recording success to begrudge it. “I just gave him the records there for him to get out of my face,” he recalled of his two Library of Congress recordings.

After his release, White returned to Chicago and recorded a dozen extraordinary songs in March 1940. He remembered showing Lester Melrose a sheaf of revamps of current blues hits and being told by the A&R man that he wanted something better. White had just two days to produce original material, and what he delivered has been
aptly described by Simon A. Napier as “a completely unique and astonishingly beautiful collection of blues.” White’s prison experience was powerfully woven into three songs, including “Parchman Farm Blues,” which hinted at an undercurrent of protest, rare in the blues and potentially troublesome for White back home. Depression and death were other uncommon themes White addressed, along with celebratory train trips, dance songs, and salutes to “Good Gin.” Writing in Tom Ashley, Sam McGee, Bukka White: Tennessee Traditional Singers (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1981), F. Jack Hurley and David Evans praised White’s 1940 performances as “the essence of art—externalizing his own experiences and observations and making them into universal themes that involve the feelings and thoughts of his people.”

Despite their artistic success (White claimed Melrose exclaimed: “Lord, man, you done 100 percent”), nothing White recorded in 1940 rivaled the success of 1937’s “Shake `Em On Down.” White continued to ramble until 1942, when defense-related work in Memphis offered some stability for the first time in his adult life. When Riley B. King first came to the River City, his gregarious cousin put him up. White, who sometimes played on Beale Street with old-timers like Gus Cannon and Frank Stokes, may have watched in dismay as the newer electric blues sound his younger cousin would exemplify rose in the early 1950s. Known as `Big Daddy’ in his Memphis neighborhood, White missed being rediscovered by Samuel Charters on a 1959 trip that unearthed Furry Lewis and few other 1920s veterans. But, thanks to his 1940 recording, “Aberdeen Mississippi Blues,” his time was imminent. His rediscovery brought even the much-traveled White to places he’d never been, such as Mexico City, where the one-time boxer/baseball player performed at the 1968 Olympic Games.

The striking thing about White’s four performances in DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN is the context they provide his music (and, by extension, much other blues). As a boy in St. Louis, White took lessons from octogenarian pianist/guitarist Johnny Thomas, who pointed out the distinction between “sit down and listen music” and “dance music.” White emphatically played dance music, and the expressive dancing he inspired with “Baby You’re Killing Me” and “Old Lady Blues” brings another vivid dimension to the
blues experience. It becomes movement as much as sound and words. Riffs which might sound monotonous in a “sit down and listen” context are quite otherwise when played for dancers. (Listen to White, watch the dancers, and consider the similar use of the funk grooves pioneered by James Brown about the time this footage was shot.) This seems self-evident, yet how many of us have seen such abandoned dancing to music of this kind? To those who have not, it’s a revelation. (The female dancer is Mabel Hillery of the Moving Star Hall Singers of the Georgia Sea Islands.)

Along with the propulsive dance rhythms he spun from his National, White was master of a slide guitar style which seems to churn with railroad whines and rhythms even in pieces which aren’t really train songs. Trains, like White’s imagination, were always in motion. He created outrageous, surreal folk tales, like “100th Man,” on the framework of those rattling rhythms. If his music tended to work around set arrangements, White could bring a bold improvisatory flair to his lyrics when so moved. Like Leadbelly and Lightnin’ Hopkins, He was what Roger D. Abrahams calls ‘a man of words,’ defined by Lomax as “a master at lightning changes of subject and viewpoint...speedy and changeful in his improvised use of language...a core concept of the black tradition.” It’s delightful to watch White spin one of his comic scenarios (“Please Don’t Put Your Daddy Outdoors”) while being taunted by Howlin’Wolf (autoharpist Kilby Snow also joined the good-time fray). Many blues singers summoned a stock of commonplace lyrics from memory to create ‘original’ songs, but White was one of the rare ones who spun spontaneous narratives of considerable length and complexity (good examples of this can be heard on Sky Songs, Arhoolie CD-323). In that, he had a jazz man’s knack for adventurous play coupled with a bluesman’s well-grounded earthiness. It was a winning combination which White confidently understood to be original. “I pulled all my songs out of my brain,” he remarked.
SON HOUSE
(1902-1988)

“People call him ‘legendary,’ but he isn’t—not in any awesome sense. He likes his eggs over easy, his bourbon straight, and when an order of fried chicken is too big, he wraps the extra pieces in a napkin and takes them home.”
– Dick Waterman, liner notes to The Legendary Son House: Father of Folk Blues, Columbia CS 9217

“...a handsome, intelligent, sensitive man, by profession a tractor driver for a huge cotton estate, by preference a musician, very modest about his own accomplishments...
“Son House, a man transformed...possessed by the song, as gypsies in Spain are possessed, gone blind with music and poetry...Son’s whole body wept...”
– Alan Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began

Son House made a profound impression on Alan Lomax. He is one of the central figures in Lomax’s book, The Land Where the Blues Began. By contrast, neither Skip James nor Bukka White nor Howlin’ Wolf rate even a mention. Lomax wrote of his 1941 field recording encounter with House: “Of all my times with the blues this was the best one, better than Leadbelly...and all the rest of them.” A quarter century later, Lomax’s continued fascination with House is evident in scenes where his camera follows a tipsy House around as someone else is performing. Even as a jukejoint reveler exchanging barbs with Howlin’ Wolf, who admonishes him for his drunkenness, House was a compelling figure.
The reason, of course, is that House, either in spite of or because of his Baptist ambivalence towards blues, embodied the idiom like no one else. Stefan Grossman once remarked, “I’d seen lots of people play the blues, but Son was the first guy I ever saw who was the blues.” It was an impression driven deeply home by performances like the one here of “Forever On My Mind.” But it had at least been clearly suggested by the recordings House made for Paramount in 1930 and for the Library of Congress in 1941-42. And it was those fabled recordings which led to his rediscovery.

One of the great coincidences of the rediscovery era is that the two great survivors of the Paramount blues stable, Son House and Skip James, were rediscovered at almost exactly the same time. Blues enthusiasts Nick Perls, Dick Waterman, and Phil Spiro had set out for the Delta from New York City, only to double back when they learned Son House was living in Rochester, New York. After a two month, sixteen state, 4,000 mile search, they met House on June 23, 1964. (Thinking of these two teams of ‘explorers,’ one from California and the other from New York, one can’t help but recall an earlier era’s adventurers competing for dibs on one Pole or another.) The twin finds were sufficiently sensational to rate an article (complete with photographs) in the July 13, 1964 Newsweek, proclaiming: “...these two were the only great country blues singers still lost...No wonder the excitement last week when it was learned that both Son House and Skip James were found...”

Of the two, it was unquestionably House who made the greater impression. James, emotionally detached, delivered a somewhat enfeebled version of his esoteric art blues, while House threw himself into the blues experience with the emotive fervor of a rural preacher, which, at heart, he really was.

Eddie James House, J.r. was raised on a plantation between Clarksdale and Lyon, Mississippi. He was preaching at age fifteen, and his ‘reverse conversion’ to blues apparently occurred only when House was in his early twenties. He suggested on occasion that his penchant for drink may have led to his being ‘defrocked’ (or at least ridiculed as a ‘backslid’ preacher) and his subsequent immersion in blues as a kind of counter-ministry.
As it had with Skip James and Bukka White, the rough and tumble blues life led to trouble for House. A 1928 shooting incident at a house party resulted in his serving over a year at Parchman Farm on manslaughter charges. Following his release he met bluesmen Charley Patton and Willie Brown in Lula, Mississippi. Patton recommended House to Paramount label talent scout Art Laibly, who arranged for House’s May 28, 1930 recording session in Grafton, Wisconsin. The seven surviving recordings from House’s sole pre-War commercial recording session are masterpieces of Delta blues.

House’s commercial success was somewhere between the abject failure of Skip James and the ‘one-hit-wonder’ status of Bukka White. Sales may have been modest, but making records at all for the same label as the widely-popular Blind Lemon Jefferson probably lent a cachet of fame to his appearances at Delta frolics and jukes. House liked to recall his encounter with a woman who had to be convinced that he was indeed the Son House who recorded “My Black Mama.” He settled in Robinsonville, singer-guitarist Willie Brown’s hometown, and the two men embarked on a musical partnership which flourished in the 1930s. It was during this time that House became something of a regional celebrity whose prowess as blues singer-guitarist made him the seminal role model for both Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. “It was Son House who influenced me to play,” Waters told Peter Guralnick. “I was really behind Son House all the way.” When Lomax interviewed the young McKinley Morganfield (Waters) for the Library of Congress, Morganfield said: “Son House...was the best. Whenever I heard he was gonna play somewhere, I followed after him...I learnt how to play with the bottleneck by watching him for about a year.”

Both Johnson and Waters would record versions of “Walking Blues,” learned from House, and other vestiges—entire songs and stylistic elements—of his influence are clearly heard in the work of his most celebrated disciples. House was a stylistic headwater for a tradition which crested in Chicago in the early 1950s at a time when he himself was employed as a Pullman Porter in upstate New York, his blues career essentially a memory. A decade later when even Muddy Waters was seen as anachronistic to African-American audiences, there was no reason to suspect that
House himself would be called on to recreate the Delta headwater music that had so enthralled the young Johnson and Waters some 30 years prior for audiences now earnest and white. But, incongruously, it happened like that.

Being wrested from obscurity to be hailed as a living legend and displayed at folk festivals isn’t the sort of thing anyone can really prepare for. Given such extraordinary, one could say surreal, circumstances, Son House handled the situation as well as anyone. Obviously, he liked to drink, yet was never too drunk to give a riveting performance. The pensive faces watching him as he performs “Forever On My Mind” are a marked contrast to the joyous dancing which ensued at Bukka White’s music. House, fountainhead of what Muddy Waters called ‘deep blues,’ always struck a nerve with his passionate performances, and perhaps his emotionally-charged blues was the sort of thing trumpeter Charles Love meant when he told Paul Oliver he considered blues “the evil spirit of music...wherever the blues is played, there’s a fight right after. You know the blues apt to get them all bewildered some kind of way...When you start with the blues, it breaks up the dancing and they stop...makes ‘em wild, they want to fight.” House, a ‘backslid’ preacher, was eternally ambivalent about his ability to so convincingly conjure “the evil spirit of music,” but he conceded that it wasn’t a business for the fainthearted. “Blues,” he once said, “they won’t do to fool with. Make you wish you was dead sometimes.”
Howlin’ Wolf  
(1910-1976)

“Wolf was at once one of the most assertively unique individuals in blues or any other endeavor, and a stubbornly persistent purveyor of traditional Mississippi Delta blues...His voice, songs and mannerisms were the sort of package that grace human experience all too rarely, and the conditions that spawned his manifestation of tradition and self-invention are long gone, though a substantial cadre of imitators remains.”

– Dick Shurman, liner notes, Howlin’ Wolf: The Chess Box

Compared to the performers who precede him in this video, Howlin’ Wolf initially comes across as strikingly urbane, patient if mildly miffed at House’s drunken chatter during an eloquent little sermon on blues which neatly sets up “Meet Me in the Bottom” with a comic infidelity scenario while underscoring Charles Love’s sense of blues as “the evil spirit of music.” Wolf suggests that the desperate social conditions which surround blues inspire one to “think evil,” and “Evil Is Going On,” recorded in 1954, had been one of his great Chess era performances.

Though a product of the Delta blues culture, Wolf had tasted success far beyond it and was worldly-wise in ways the other performers here simply weren’t. He had come to Chicago in 1953 to become Muddy Waters’s chief rival on the competitive Chicago blues scene, and though he wasn’t significantly younger than the other performers here, their
semiprofessional careers were long past at the time Wolf was at his professional peak. Granted, the African-American audience for his music was rapidly waning in 1966, but he was still actively recording for Chess. His move towards an increasingly white audience was facilitated in part by famous fans, the Rolling Stones, who insisted Wolf join them in 1965 on Shindig. While Wolf was in little danger of becoming a teen idol, he was nonetheless still an active professional and probably resented any perception of him as an exhibit in a blues Jurassic Park.

Howlin’ Wolf embodied the role implied by his name, though he was born Chester Arthur Burnett in West Point, Mississippi. His parents worked on a plantation in Ruleville, not far from Will Dockery’s plantation, Charley Patton’s home base. The flamboyant Patton taught Wolf the rudiments of Delta blues guitar, and he squirreled away verses learned from Patton and his contemporaries which served him well throughout his career. Even on his final Chess session in 1973, bits of Patton’s “Down the Dirt Road Blues” and “Pony Blues” float through a song, “Can’t Stay Here.”

By the 1930s, Wolf was already an imposing figure in the Delta. “I was afraid of Wolf,” Johnny Shines once said, likening him to “some kind of beast or something,” adding that his fearsome presence was a product less of his size (six feet, three inches and 270 pounds) than of “the sound that he was giving off.” For awhile in the thirties Wolf roamed the Delta in the company of Robert Johnson and Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson), who married Wolf’s sister and taught him harmonica. Music, however, was a sideline: Wolf continued to farm with his family, living an unremarkable life interrupted by his enlistment in the Army in 1941. He never saw combat, though he did entertain troops while stationed in the Seattle area. After the War he returned to farming, but the promise of something better led him to Memphis, where he formed his first band in 1948. Soon he was working as a disc jockey and live performer on radio station KWEM in West Memphis.

Wolf had come to the right place at the right time, for a new-found access of African-American talent to radio, highly selective in the past, was just opening opportunities which made Memphis a Mecca for a new generation of blues performers. Wolf would seem to stand somewhere between the generation of Son House and that of B.B. King,
but his recording debut actually followed King’s, who was then being recorded by Sam Phillips. Wolf was already 40 when Phillips, who recalled he had “the biggest feet I’d ever seen on a human being,” corralled him in a Memphis studio in 1951. “When I heard him,” Phillips told Robert Palmer, “I said, ‘This is for me. This is where the soul of man never dies.’ His eyes would light up and you would see the veins in his neck and buddy there was nothing on his mind but that song.” Phillips would go on to record Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and many others who distinguished themselves in rock `n roll and country, but he steadfastly maintains Howlin’ Wolf was his single greatest discovery.

The success of “Moanin’ at Midnight” and other recordings for the RPM and Chess labels fanned the flames of Wolf’s popularity in Memphis. “Howlin’ Wolf drew more people in a club than anybody that’s ever been in town,” Rufus Thomas told Hugh Merrill. “Drew more people than Ray Charles.” Both the Los Angeles-based Bihari brothers and Chicago’s Chess brothers were vying for exclusive claim to Wolf’s talents on record. Chess won out, and Memphis lost its reigning blues star. “Leonard Chess kept worryin’ me to come to Chicago,” Wolf told David Booth. “I moved to Chicago in 1952 or ’53. I had a four thousand dollar car and $3900 in my pocket. I’m the onliest one drove out of the South like a gentleman.”

Chicago was a new world to conquer, and Wolf wasted little time in establishing himself as a formidable presence in the Windy City. He began recording there early in 1954, and seven years later recorded “Down in the Bottom,” a variant of one of the oldest Delta themes, “Roll and Tumble Blues,” first waxed by Hambone Willie Newbern in 1929. In his performances of the song here, we see Wolf playing slide on a Firebird electric guitar, a distinctive model introduced by Gibson in 1963 and more recently favored by such blues-inspired rockers as Johnny Winter. By contrast with the upscale Firebird, Wolf’s brilliant lead guitarist, Hubert Sumlin, is seen playing a cheap Italian Eko electric, its body resplendent with the sort of plastic used on Italian accordions. In spite or perhaps partly because of this peculiar instrument, Sumlin always got a ferocious signature tone. Tenor saxophonist Eddie Shaw lays a simple drone counterpoint beneath Wolf’s terrific performance.
The second song we hear from Wolf, “How Many More Years,” was coincidentally the second song he ever recorded (Memphis, May 15, 1951), the ‘B’ side of his hit, “Moanin’ at Midnight.” It became a staple of Wolf’s repertoire, and 14 years after recording it he chose to perform it on Shindig, the Stones sitting at his feet. Wolf’s often-overlooked prowess with harmonica is shown to good effect here, as is his obvious debt to his teacher, Sonny Boy Williamson.

1951, the year of Wolf’s recording debut, was also the one in which Sonny Boy accompanied Elmore James on a recording destined to become a post-War blues classic, “Dust My Broom.” Robert Johnson had originally cut it 15 years prior, and Wolf would not himself record it for Chess till the year after his performance here. (He had, however, recorded it ‘live’ on a European tour in 1964).

If, in 1966, Son House was the living linchpin between primordial unrecorded Delta blues and the sound it became in Chicago shortly after World War II, Howlin’ Wolf was the still-vital link between that music and its imminent ‘roots rock’ transformation by such enthusiasts as the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton, with whom Wolf recorded in London in 1970. (As ‘forefather,’ Wolf was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991.) In the years between this filming and his death, Wolf was less often seen in settings like this informal ‘juke’ and more often at blues festivals attended by largely white audiences. It is therefore exciting to see him in this environment and in the company of people very like those who gave him such nicknames as Bull Cow, Big Foot Chester and Howlin’ Wolf 30-some years prior. Seeing Wolf this way, even if only on film, is every bit as exciting for some of us as seeing Son House was for blues 78 collectors 30 years ago. To watch him throw himself into “Meet Me in the Bottom” with an abandon quite uncharacteristic of a 56-year-old man is to agree with Sam Phillips: “This is where the soul of man never dies.”
REV. PEARLY BROWN
(1918-??)

“I remember that this minor-keyed pathos used to seem to me almost too sad to dwell upon...There is no parallel instance of an oppressed race thus sustained by the religious sentiment alone. These songs are but the vocal expression of the simplicity of their faith and the sublimity of their resignation.” – Thomas W. Higginson, Army Life in a Black Regiment, 1870

Blind street singers were once common to Southern towns and cities. Some were quite widely traveled, and the easily-transported guitar was their instrument of preference. The prevalence of such men among early recorded bluesmen is witnessed by a roll call of legends: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, and Blind Willie McTell, for starters. There was also an impressive group of street singers who hewed primarily to sacred songs, dubbed ‘guitar evangelists’ by record collectors. Blind Willie Johnson of Texas was the most remarkable of these, and his recordings (available in the collection, The Complete Blind Willie Johnson, Columbia/Legacy C2K 52835) were widely emulated throughout the South.

Rev. Pearly Brown and his wife Christine open their three-song performance with a song Johnson and a woman,
possibly Willie B. Harris, recorded in 1928. The gentle call-and-response between voice and guitar and the male and female voices heard in Johnson’s recording are echoed in the Brown’s performance. The song itself was old even when Johnson recorded it: Thomas W. Higginson heard it sung by African-American soldiers during the Civil War. The text is inspired by the parable of the ten virgins, especially Matthew 25:7: “Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.” Christ’s explanation follows in Matthew 25:13: “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.” The song advocates vigilance towards the Second Coming.

“Pure Religion” is another performance which appears indebted to the 1920s `guitar evangelists,’ a term Vocalion had applied to Edward W. Clayborn, a singer-bottleneck guitarist who recorded a version of this as “Then We’ll Need That True Religion.” Though no less introspective than Brown’s two previous songs, “It’s A Mean Old World” lacks their slide guitar accompaniment, ‘bluesy’ minor melody and antiphonal vocal exchanges with his wife, qualities which made them seem more ancienly traditional. “It’s A Mean Old World” is akin to the sacred songs of Rev. Gary Davis, and Brown’s picking, simple yet effective, is very much in the Piedmont style. That’s understandable, given his Georgia background. “The little-known Rev. Pearly Brown was a blind street singer,” writes Mary Katherine Aldin in Blues With a Feeling (Vanguard VCD2-77005), “born August 8, 1918 in Abbeville, Georgia. His grandmother, an ex-slave who lived to be over 100, influenced him to play music; after attending the Georgia Academy for the Blind he began playing accordion, harmonica and guitar on the streets of Macon, Georgia, traveling back and forth to his home in Americus by Greyhound bus.”

By 1966, men like Brown were anachronisms, remnants of a bitter past in a seemingly progressive America waging war on poverty and making strides towards becoming a Great Society. 30 years later, we again see singers on our streets, not necessarily blind but often homeless, and Lomax’s admonition that blues is omnipresent, “now that people everywhere begin to taste the bitterness of the post-industrial period,” rings true. It’s a mean old world alright, and one in which blues seems always to find a home. – Mark Humphrey
Imagine you've stumbled into a juke joint where the mentor of Robert Johnson, Son House, and the idol of the Rolling Stones, Howlin’ Wolf, 'dis, one another. Picture a place where Wolf taunts Bukka White while the robust Parchman Farm alumnus spins his proto-funk dance grooves and the spectral Skip James weaves his haunting “Devil Got My Woman.” It's an archetypal blues 'crossroads' where legends of the 1920s Delta and 1950s Chicago share the same musical space, suspended out of time in a super-real present, a nonspecific 'bluestime.' This is no fantasy. You enter this very juke joint in Devil Got My Woman, a video of extraordinarily powerful footage Alan Lomax captured during the 1966 Newport Folk Festival.

Devil Got My Woman is not, however, concert footage from Newport. Alan Lomax recreated a juke joint at Newport, stocked the bar, and let nature take its course. The resultant film footage captures the blues experience in its first and truest milieu, one in which African-American men and women drink, dance, and share their troubles and triumphs. Brooding faces absorbing the wailing pleas of Son House and rubber-legged dancers strutting to Bukka's buoyant blues are as much a part of the mise en scene as the legendary principals of the cast, themselves more relaxed and unguarded than in any comparable performance footage. A heretofore-unseen glimpse of a unique blues summit, Devil Got My Woman offers a bracing reminder of this music's elemental vitality and the blues culture which nurtured it.

Titles include: SKIP JAMES Devil Got My Woman, I'm So Glad, Worried Blues BUKKA WHITE Baby You're Killing Me, Old Lady Blues, Please Don't Put Your Daddy Outdoors, 100th Man SON HOUSE Forever On My Mind HOWLIN' WOLF Meet Me In The Bottom, How Many More Years, Dust My Broom REV. PEARLY BROWN Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning, Pure Religion, It's A Mean Old World.