

# A DAY WITH JOE BUSSARD

By D. Thomas Moon



Joe Bussard with Tom Moon, with Joe holding a rare Rector Trio test pressing of 'Pretty Little Indian Napanee', recorded 3rd December 1930. Photo: Maryll Moon.

**J**oe Bussard is both an eccentric record collector and an American treasure. His record collection (housing some 20,000 country, bluegrass, blues, gospel and jazz 78s) contains many of the rarest, most-sought-after, highest quality recordings ever committed to shellac, including numerous only known copies by both well-known and obscure musicians. Always willing to share his collection, his transcriptions have appeared over the years on countless reissue labels. Joe himself has produced several CD packages, including a set of cross-genre faves, 'Down In The Basement'; a five-CD anthology of Fonotone material (Joe's 78rpm label featuring artists he recorded in his basement between 1956 and 1970); and 'The Year Of Jubilo', a set of songs penned or popularised during the American Civil War. His profile has steadily risen in recent years, largely as a consequence of the success of the documentary film which features him called 'Desperate Man Blues: Discovering The Roots Of American Music', which won a Dendy Award for best documentary in 2003. With decades of radio experience under his belt, Joe also continues to host a popular radio programme, 'Country Classics', available as a free podcast (visit [www.dust-digital.com/country-classics](http://www.dust-digital.com/country-classics)). I spent a day with Joe recently and interviewed him for *Blues & Rhythm*.

We arrived at Joe's with time to beat the school bus traffic we might encounter on our way to Barbara's Fritchie's restaurant in Frederick, Maryland for breakfast – as per Joe's instructions. 'Wet' eggs, dry toast, bacon, and coffee.

Then down to his basement and a visual overload! Memorabilia, photos, records. Salivation just shy of a drool (I also collect records!). Things get hopping fast. Joe spins a vault copy of gospel singer and guitarist Mother McCollum; an E copy of Bo Jones' 'Leavenworth Prison Blues' on Vocalion from 1929, Jelly Roll Morton, Kentucky Jazz Babies. Joe is dancing around like a hyperactive kid who's missed a dose of Ritalin. Then there is Bennie Moten, Eddie and Sugar and his Fonotone 78s.

Joe doesn't nap. Picking through stacks of records for sale, I find a copy of the Buck Mountain Band's 'Yodeling Blues' on Velvet Tone. "Only known copy of that one on Velvet Tone," Joe points out. "I have the original on Okeh, of course. They put out one side only of the original Okeh record on two different dime store labels, Velvet Tone and Clarion. The flip sides were no good. I don't know why they did that," he shrugs. I fork over the dough for it.

More spins: Luke Highnight And His Ozark Strutters; Rector Trio; Moatsville String Ticklers; Kentucky String Ticklers; Stanley Brothers on Rich-R-Tone; Clarence Williams on Broadway and QRS. Palmolive's Inner Sanctum Mysteries; Prince Albert Smoking Tobacco radio transcriptions, a 'crapitation' (farting) contest. Joe also demonstrates his

slide guitar technique. Nine hours have passed by and my wife's cat allergies getting much worse, so we say a polite farewell. Joe does his best W.C. Fields: "Come back next time and hear the B-sides," he laughs.

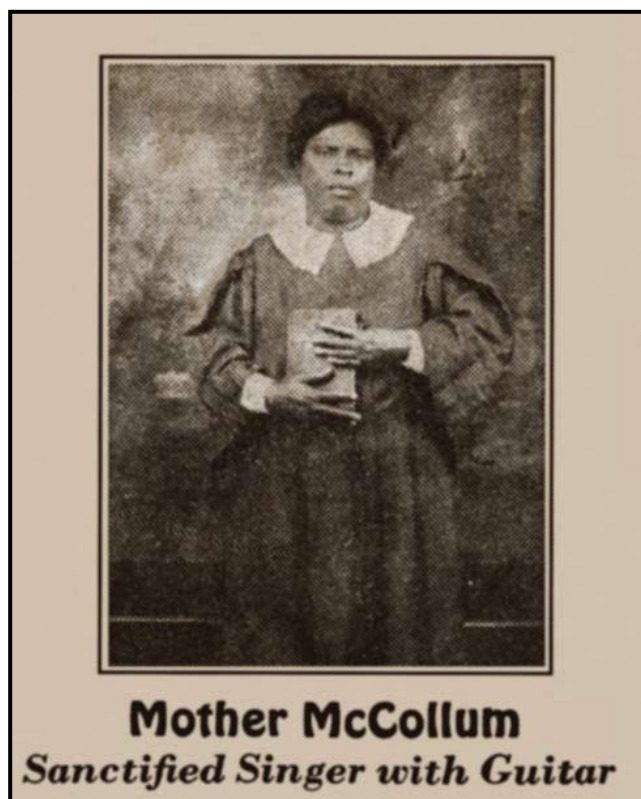
A while later, after I had fully recovered, I managed to present Joe with a few questions:

**What's your opinion of the high-profile projects Jack White of the White Stripes has been involved with in recent years – the Paramount sets, PBS' 'American Epic'? What letter grade would you give these efforts?**

With the Paramount sets, I liked the books about Paramount and the pictures, but they're so expensive the average person's not gonna fool with them. I'd give 'em a B. With the 'American Epic' series on PBS, they dwelled too long on the Memphis Jug Band, and way, way too long on the American Indian snake dance. They gave a little bit to Jimmie Rodgers, and a little bit of Cajun without mentioning Dennis McGee or Sady Courville. I'd give 'em a B because at least they tried. Somebody out there now has heard of the Carter Family. Maybe they'll like what they heard, although they talked over the top of the damned records. You got ten seconds of what they're doing, and yap, yap, yap, yap. Why didn't they let people hear the stuff?

**I like the five CD 'American Epic' package. I wonder about copyright. There are those who feel that it's legit if, and only if, a marketed transfer is uniquely one's own and proper licensing fees are paid to Sony, the George H. Buck Foundation, etc. Any opinion on that?**

The artists were originally paid for what they did, and as far as I'm concerned, it's all public domain, although I know people who'd send the artists' families some money, which they didn't have to do. One time a guy wanted to reissue some Mamie Smith Victor stuff. He got a call from Victor. "I hear you're putting out Mamie Smith stuff." He said, "Are



Mother McCollum advert. From the B&R Archive.

you gonna put it out?" The guy from Victor said no, and that was the end of it. They're not gonna put it out because they can't make any money, and they're certainly not gonna take you to court for putting out some old records fifty, sixty, eighty years old. It ain't worth their time and effort. A lot of times they don't even have the stampers or the material anymore.

**I've acquired a stack of reels you made in the mid 1960s for your collecting buddy Howard Myers – reels of music transfers and taped letters.....**

We used to make up song tapes and make up a letter tape to send along: "Here's a record I just picked up the other day. Really great." Play a bit of it, talk some more, you know.

**I was surprised to discover that there are some *ad hoc* performances by Mike Stewart or you and Oscar Myers on these taped letter reels. 'Cumberland Gap,' 'Don't Want Your Gravy, Mama, When It Gets Cold' ...**

I used to do that all the time!!! It was a lot of fun. Most of the guys I dealt with are all dead. I used to swap tapes with Dave Crisp in Australia, guys from just all over the country. I got some nice records from Howard in exchange for those tapes.

**And the sound quality is amazing, I might add.....**

I was using an Ampex back then to make those tapes, what I used to record the Fonotone stuff with. I only ever used one mic. That was all I needed.

**Lets talk about your Fonotone label. Among all of the artists you recorded – Mike Seeger, Stefan Grossman, John Fahey – who impressed you the most? Fahey is iconic to a lot of enthusiasts.**

There's two. I'd have to say Bob Coltman and Ted Kreh. Ted was a natural-born musician. He sang and played music like you breathe air. Fahey was alright. I kinda liked him. Everybody liked his records. The last time I recorded him in '62 was with Mike Stewart as Backward Sam Firk. They came up and they did six titles. They didn't have a name for the band, so I said: "How about the Mississippi Swampers?" Fahey said, "Yeaaaaaaah, man." And then they did a guitar duet thing and they didn't have a name for that. So I said: "How about 'Dark And Lonely Night Blues'?" Fahey says, "Yeaaaaaaah, man." That was the last time I seen Fahey, in '62.

**You have become legendary for your proclamations about the death of 'good' American vernacular music. So when was the last gasp for country music, in your view?**

The last gasp for country music was Hank Williams Sr. The last gasp for country music period was 1955. The last country record made was by Jimmy Murphy for Columbia. Six titles in Nashville, and that was country. A straight, upright bass, the fantastic guitar Murphy played, and Onie Wheeler on harmonica. There ain't anything past that date that comes anywhere's near it. Commercialised crap. "Got my foot on the bar stool, my elbow in the ash tray and my beer 'cause you ain't here." That's one I made up, by the way. I should probably publish it and make a million dollars off of it!! But it all just went to hell in a hand basket, all this modern rock. Rock and roll killed all forms of music, like a cancer. The last stuff Ernest Tubb or even Hank Snow put out was just terrible. Even Doc Williams, and Doc Williams was here and we talked about all of that kinda stuff. The last album he made, I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. They were trying to compete with this rock and roll.

**What about blues? You like the transitional Bluebird stuff – Big Joe Williams, Sonny Boy Williamson....**

Oh yeah! Have you heard Henry Townsend's 'She's Got A Mean Disposition' (Bluebird 5966)? What a record!

**Post-war isn't out entirely, right? I know that you like Joe Hill Louis.**

In isolated spots, there's some good stuff. I got a couple of Muddy Waters' early 78s, but you get to that banging, thumping stuff, that's my limit.

**What about jazz? You often say that it was gone by 1933, and yet we still had Henry 'Red' Allen, Stuff Smith, the Alabama Jug Band ...**

The Alabama Jug Band was with Clarence Williams. Still good, but nothing like it was earlier. They lost that tone. That beautiful sound, that was jazz. It was due to the Depression. Nobody had the money. If you put out a record, it'd sell 200, 300 copies, some less than that. Then Prohibition was abolished.

Everybody could go and drink anywhere, so the clubs and the bands, what were they gonna do? Just left out in the cold, so they kinda faded out. When they came back, when times got a little better, when 25-cent double-faced records came out, there was still some hot stuff. Clarence



Joe (Bussard) and Jerry (Marcum) – 'Mama Told Me Blues' on Fonotone 6501-A. Photo: D. Thomas Moon.

Williams made some nice stuff up until '34, '35, but it was gone. Swing. The icing on the cake was big bands. Ugh. All these guys playing and nothing happening. Why couldn't the Depression have been in 1939 instead of '29? We'd have some good music instead of a bunch of idiots running around trying to find Glen Miller Bluebirds. There's tons of that stuff, passed over tons of it. Dullsville.

**If you had to hypothetically pick among the record companies for one complete 78rpm catalogue, which would you pick?**

Ooooo. That's a toughie. Man, that is one heck of a question. I guess I'd almost have to say Victor. They had so many incredible artists.

**And five desert island 78s from your shelves?**

Oh, my God, that's a good question! Now let me see. Well, I think I'd probably go with Jelly Roll Morton's 'Burnin' The Iceberg' (Victor 38075). The flip side is 'Tank Town Bump'; 'Goofy Dust' by Bennie Moten's Kansas City Orchestra, that's on Okeh 8184. God, this is tough. Probably 'Blue Yodel' by Jimmie Rodgers (Victor 21142); 'Whoop 'Em Up Cindy' by Uncle Dave Macon (Vocalion 15323) and I'd guess Charlie Patton, 'Mississippi Boweavil' (Paramount 12805). I'll give you six! Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground' (Columbia 14303).



From the D. Thomas Moon Collection and B&R Archive.