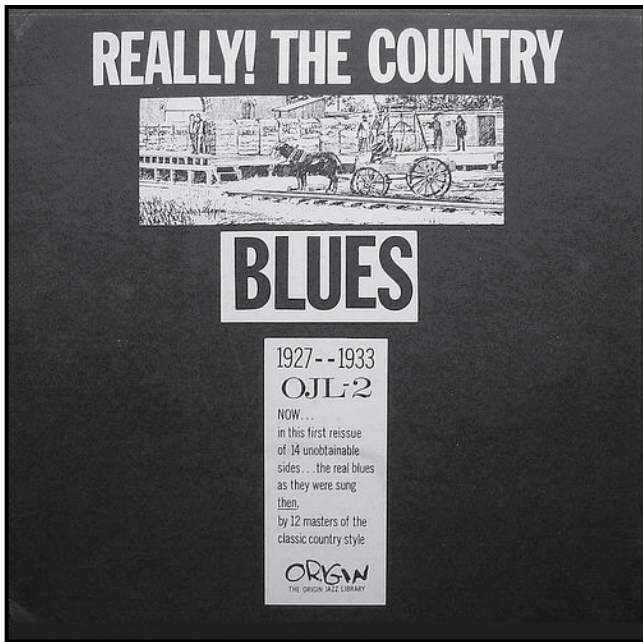


Ray's Rudiments: Great Blues LP Series

by RAY TEMPLETON

Origin Jazz Library

OJL – did it insidiously mis-shape our tastes, or generously provide us with the means to form our own?



From the B&R Archive.

There's a danger that articles looking back at great series of LPs could turn into an exercise in nostalgia – an ageing blues fan nodding his grizzled head over a pile of old vinyl that means little to current buyers of the music. More interesting is to consider how the availability of particular music at particular times not only provided some of us with the soundtrack of our developing years, but also helped to advance our understanding, to offer us the opportunity to shape our own tastes, and to help form our view of the music's history. The question of shaping the tastes of blues fans is one that has become somewhat controversial in recent years, and the label that is the subject of this article is inevitably implicated. Take for example, Ian Nagoski's assertion, quoted by Amanda Petrusich in her 2014 book, 'Do Not Sell At Any Price'.

'Skip James does not represent pre-war blues. Barbecue Bob does. Barbecue Bob and Tampa Red, they sold like crazy. Skip James is a weirdo. He's a freak. He doesn't really fit in, and the fact that he's such a big part of the blues canon is a direct result of the blues canon having been written by white men'.

We've been here before. To get down to cases, the now rather shop-worn argument is that by reissuing recordings of artists such as Skip, whose commercial appeal in the 1920s was negligible, rather than high-selling Bob and Red, certain reissue labels – starting with Origin Jazz Library – helped to distort the question of who were the greatest blues artists of the pre-war era. Quite apart from the unnecessarily contemptuous tone in the use of words like 'weirdo' and 'freak', this begs the question of how we measure greatness. By popularity? Surely not, and anyway, can a freak not be a genius? The infant Mozart had written five symphonies before he was ten years old – hardly normal behaviour.

Now, when everything has been issued, reissued and re-reissued, it's difficult to imagine what it was like in 1960, back before there were enough blues reissues to influence anybody's taste very much. Even active shellac collectors could pore over discographies which listed records they had little prospect of hearing, or they would see names on auction lists knowing that only the successful bidder would discover what

they sounded like. They didn't have to wonder about Barbecue Bob, or Tampa Red, whose recordings were common enough that collectors could both find them and afford them. Even today, you could secure a 78 by these artists with a bid of tens of dollars, not the thousands that might be expected for a Charlie Patton or a Skip James in good shape. Rarity creates its own mystique, of course, and it also suits the revisionist construction to imply that we value artists such as those because of an unhealthy fetish for 78s that are almost impossible to find.

So, who are these 'white men' responsible for writing the 'blues canon'? Among the villains of this view must be those who first presented us with the works of such singers as Patton, James, Son House, and Tommy Johnson, for example – none of whose records sold extensively in their day – and promoted them as great artists. Step forward, the team who launched Origin Jazz Library (sometimes referred to simply as Origin, or OJL, which I'll use for consistency's sake in this article), a small independent label based in Brooklyn Heights, New York, launched in 1960 by Pete Whelan and Bill Givens.

Whelan was the collector, Givens was a lover of the music who would handle the business end of things. Interviewed in 1997, Pete Whelan related that one of their intentions was to counter a then prevalent notion, "... that jazz was what really counted and was meaningful, and blues was just a fringe, except for Leadbelly". They had intended to start with Robert Johnson, but they discovered that Columbia Records – owners of the rights to Johnson's recordings – were planning an official compilation. Plan B, then, was a compilation of work by another singer from Mississippi, whom Whelan in fact felt was 'much more interesting and varied in different ways' than Johnson (interview, 2014). Their first release was 'Charlie Patton! 1929-32', OJL 1.

Pete Whelan had first heard about Patton from one James McKune, who was also part of a loose group – or 'clique' if you prefer the conspiracy theory of blues history – of New York record collectors, now often referred to as the Blues Mafia (seized upon gleefully by the journalistic tendency among blues writers). McKune has become an object of fascination among some recent writers, even if they might seem more interested in his idiosyncratic personal habits, eccentric writing and violent death than his acute musical insight.

Around the time OJL was getting under way, McKune – who would present his credentials as having been 'listening to blues records since 1943' – wrote a series of columns for a supplement entitled 'Palaver', in the British auction and sales magazine *Vintage Jazz Mart* (VJM), headed 'The Great Country Blues Singers'. It was his clear intention to establish which singers of country blues (his term) are 'great', and which are not ('Jefferson made only one record I would call great', he averred, claiming to have heard all but five of Blind Lemon's output). If you wanted to make a case for a white man attempting to write the blues canon, you could start with McKune's VJM columns, where he wrote quite frankly that he was 'interested in knowing who the great blues singers are, not in who sold best'.

'I write for those who want a different basis for evaluating blues singers ... their relative greatness, or competence ...', he claimed, although what he actually wrote about artists like James and Patton doesn't offer much of an objective 'basis for evaluating' them, so much as some descriptive commentary and an enthusiastic, opinionated declaration of their stature. Some of his assertions – such as that Patton was 'pure' – may not stand up to close examination today. In any case, it's unlikely that many reading these columns would have blindly accepted his opinions without actually listening, and fortunately OJL was starting to offer the opportunity to do that. The names checked in McKune's columns are essentially the same as those which would appear in the tracklistings of OJL albums.

OJL 1 consisted of twelve of Patton's recordings, a good cross-section of his work – mostly blues, but also gospel, a ballad and even heavily reworked popular material. His full output comprised 52 sides, so he

must have had some appeal beyond his local area, but the 78s are scarce enough to indicate that they did not sell in very large quantities. Patton had been dead for a quarter of a century, and it can reasonably be said that his work had been largely forgotten. He had not appeared on any of the numerous dubbed 78s that collectors had been reissuing on their little specialist labels in the 1940s and '50s. A single one of his recordings, 'Mississippi Boveavil Blues', was included in Harry Smith's 'Anthology Of American Folk Music'. Any objective listener, however, prepared to meet the challenge of Patton's sometimes fierce delivery and perplexing diction, should be able to hear the passion and power of his performances, a deep, first-hand engagement with a wide range of often quite remarkable material, with elaborately detailed guitar arrangements, played with great skill and the most distinctive rhythmic flair.

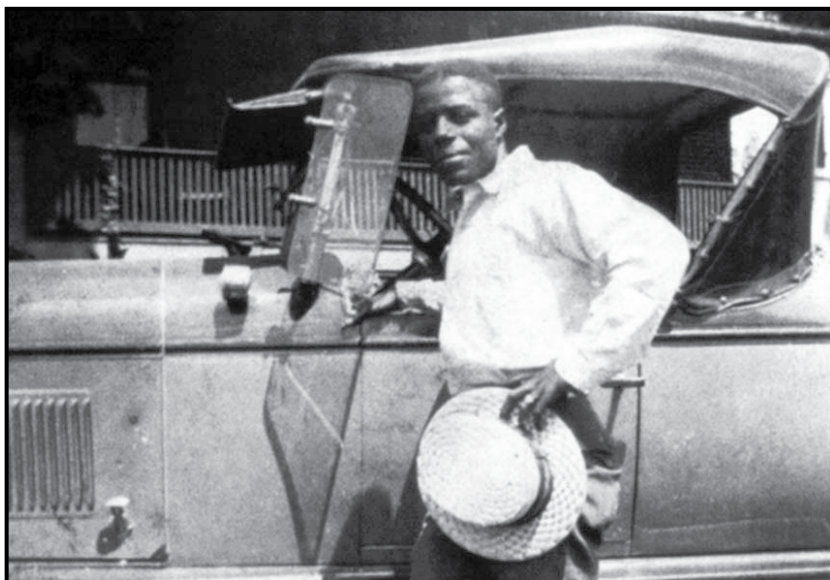
Inside the sleeves of those first OJL LPs was a printed statement, described as a 'prospectus', which advanced the argument that what few blues LP reissues there had been had favoured records in fine, low-noise condition, and thus great performances had been passed over. OJL, it said, would make selection decisions based on 'musical merit alone'. They would use the best copies available, while acknowledging that listeners might have to deal with the 'sound barrier' (i.e. the presence of intrusive surface noise etc). '... while it is perhaps a tragedy (that Charlie Patton) was not recorded at a time when better sound reproduction might have been possible' says the prospectus, 'it would be a greater one if he were to be neglected ...' It also states that some income from sales would be reserved for royalty payments, although as all artists involved were likely dead they might use this revenue to promote the music in other ways, such as the publication of a country blues songbook. This never happened, although from the description, perhaps this was the seed of what became *78 Quarterly*, the journal later edited by Pete Whelan, as essential as it would be eccentric.

The prospectus also announced the next release: 'Really! The Country Blues', OJL 2. Whelan has acknowledged that the title – Bill Givens' idea – was effectively a riposte to that of Sam Charters' book 'The Country Blues', published with its supporting LP anthology the previous year. However you define 'country blues' – a term that never really seems very satisfactory – Charters had used the rubric to cover a wide range of artists, including some urban born and bred, and urbane in inclination. With Leroy Carr, Lonnie Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Big Bill and Washboard Sam, Charters was clearly offering a view of blues that did reflect the tastes of the original audience. In his VJM column, James McKune, drawing a clear distinction between popularity and greatness, made this very point: '... [it] would, or might, be all right if his book were published for those Negroes, fifty years old or older, who could thereafter read all about the singers they listened to fifty years ago'. Whelan felt that Charters 'didn't have the records to put out a really great album', although interestingly, he is one of those acknowledged in the notes to 'The Country Blues' among the providers of records used (mis-spelt 'Whalen' – presumably a phonetic error).

The artists featured in 'Really! The Country Blues' were distinguished in the prospectus as: '... the ones who stayed at home and recorded the least ...,' effectively an argument for why they had not been as popular as most of those included on Charters' anthology.

This form of words also echoes the fans of New Orleans jazz, who in the previous decade had claimed that musicians who had 'stayed at home' in the Crescent City – Bunk Johnson, George Lewis, Wooden Joe Nicholas etc. – played an older, more authentic form of jazz, contrasting them with the more famous and popular Louis Armstrong, for example, who had built his career in Chicago and New York.

As virtually nothing



Skip James, circa late 1920s. From the B&R Archive.

was known about the artists included in OJL 2 at the time, they had no way of knowing whether they had stayed at home or not. Some had, some hadn't, but they had certainly not recorded much, nor had they enjoyed any significant commercial success, and when you listen to their individualistic, fervently emotional artistry, perhaps that's not surprising.

Apart from a 78 dub of one of his piano sides in the 1940s (Steiner-Davis SD 110), OJL 2 offered the first reissue for Skip James. Over and over again ever since, listeners have been captivated by the strange and wonderful 'Devil Got My Woman', by its spine-tingling guitar lines, its tormented complaint of a vocal (and few have felt the need to call James a 'freak' or a 'weirdo'). Here, also, is the first reissue for a Son House Paramount, generating an intensity that could probably never be commercially popular. Here – among others – are the first vinyl appearances by Tommy Johnson and Garfield Akers. Johnson's reputation has grown mightily in the intervening years, as his influence on the next generation and more of blues artists became increasingly apparent, while Akers' two-part 'Cottonfield Blues' is sometimes cited as the first rock'n'roll record – one of many, of course.

Downbeat magazine's blues critic, Pete Welding, immediately and enthusiastically grasping the albums' importance, sang their praises and accorded both his maximum five star rating. He awarded four stars to the next, featuring Henry Thomas, also little known, apart from two tracks on the 'Anthology'. 'Sings The Texas Blues!', OJL 3, included about half of Thomas's output. I'd like to think that buyers in 1962 experienced the same thrill I did a decade and a half later, hearing this rich voice reaching out of a disappearing history, to scatter multifarious facets of the tradition before him, conjuring a unique magic out of his pan-pipes, but Whelan recalled that it didn't sell well. Only one other artist in the label's early years got his own album: 'Crying Sam Collins And His Git-Fiddle', OJL 10 (with two 'surprises' by King Solomon Hill appended). Before he had heard Patton, Whelan considered Collins his favourite, a very distinctive, highly affecting singer, with an unusual, falsetto vocal and varied guitar techniques, including some very striking slide licks.

Nowadays we're used to blues anthologies compiled using regional criteria, but it was still a new idea when 'The Mississippi Blues 1927-1940', OJL 5, was released, presenting Bukka White, Willie Brown, Kid Bailey, Robert Wilkins, Mississippi John Hurt, William Harris, Skip James and Son House. This time the booklet had notes by Gayle Dean Wardlow, lyric transcriptions by David Evans and even a photograph of one of the artists (Hurt, recently 'rediscovered'). Wardlow's notes not only offered biographical information, but made a speculative attempt to consider stylistic aspects, seriously ground-breaking stuff for 1963, and a foundation for much of what has been written about Delta blues since. Nor did he shy away from the fragility of some of his knowledge, for example saying of the still undiscovered Bukka White: 'Rumoured stabbed to death in jail, also rumoured to be still alive in Chicago'. There would be two more volumes of Mississippi blues. 'No. 2: The Delta 1929-32', OJL 11, was described in typically colourful language as '16 Previously Unreissued Sides In The Mississippi Delta Style By A Cadre Of Prophetic Bluesmen Who Voiced The Full, Raw Language Of This Area's Rich Musical Argot!'; 'No. 3: Transition, 1926-1937', OJL 17, took the story forward a little chronologically, bringing in artists such as Robert Johnson and Big Joe Williams.

Further anthologies compiled by geographical selection would follow over time, including the outstanding 'Alabama Country 1927-1931', OJL 14, which introduced us to Barefoot Bill/Ed Bell, as well as a variety of extraordinary blues harp players, then later in the decade, when regional



Pete Whelan, Photo courtesy of Pete Whelan.



surveys were increasingly common, 'The Blues In St. Louis, 1929-1937', OJL 20, and 'The Blues In Memphis 1927-1939', OJL 21.

In April 2014, in the *New York Times*, John Jeremiah Sullivan wrote about Geeshie Wiley and Elvie Thomas, the female duo who between them recorded six sides for Paramount in 1930 or 1931. This isn't the place to rehearse the rights and wrongs of Sullivan's methods,

but among the familiar journalistic tropes about 'mysterious' and 'lost' blues artists, there is a point that is worth noting in the present context. The story used a 1961 interview of L.V. (Elvie) Thomas by Texas blues researcher Mack McCormick. Remarkably, to us now, at the time he was questioning her about her recordings, McCormick had not actually heard them. The first reissue, of course, came on OJL – on 'The Country Girls! 1927-1935', OJL 6, in 1964. There had, of course, been reissues of early female blues singers before, of the vaudeville stage variety, such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, but characteristically, OJL took a very different direction, spotlighting singers accompanied by guitars – Lottie Kimbrough, Rosie Mae Moore and Geeshie & Elvie – strong, assertive women, some influenced by the vaudeville singers, others not, some accompanied by men and others demonstrating their own unique ways on the instrument.

'The Legendary Charlie Patton 1887-1934 Number 2', OJL 7, presented a further sixteen tracks ('easily superior' to the first volume, said Pete Welding in *Downbeat*), including one each by Patton's wife, Bertha Lee, and his friend and sometime fiddle accompanist Henry Sims, and there was a second anthology of male soloists, 'Country Blues Encores 1927-1935', OJL 8, in 1965. This is where the wider world first encounters Blind Joe Reynolds and Rube Lacey, artists whose paucity of recorded output and subsequent rarity indicates no great commercial popularity, but who offer compelling statements of singular authority and skill. It's an indication of how quickly pre-war blues research was advancing in those years, that OJL 8 included another booklet with biographical notes and even some photos, also retrospectively covering artists who had seemed so anonymous on OJL 2.

The only other general anthology would come a few years later, 'Let's Go Riding', OJL 18, featuring artists such as Sylvester Weaver, Blind Blake and Kokomo Arnold (as Giffiddle Jim), and described as 'a change of pace from OJL's usual hard-core blues programming. Interesting obscurities, few geniuses ... a more fluent and less solemn aspect of the Negro musician's art and repertoire'.

Not every OJL release was guitar blues. Interestingly, according to Whelan, OJL's biggest seller would be 'The Great Jug Bands', OJL 4, which selected tracks by Cannon's Jug Stompers, The Memphis Jug Band, Whistler and His Jug Band and others, illustrating the diversity of sounds that could be encompassed by an idiom built around raspy, home-made bass lines. Presumably, this success encouraged 'More Of That Jug Band Sound 1927-1939', OJL 19. Piano blues had been largely neglected until 'Rugged Piano Classics 1927-1939', OJL 15, and 'Ragged Piano Classics 1923-1943', OJL 16, offered the work of players whose obscurity matched that of the guitar players on other volumes, like Rob Cooper and Blind Leroy Garnett. There was also 'Byways Of Jazz', OJL 9, exploring some of the dimmer reaches of the early jazz landscape, including names like Frank Bunch and his Fuzzy-Wuzzies, and Dewey Jackson's Peacock Orchestra.

Harry Smith's 'Anthology' had devoted one of six LPs to sacred music, from both sides of the colour line, with examples of both the enormously popular and prolific black preachers and the guitar evangelists. Sam Charters had produced a rather scrappy set for Folkways about Blind Willie Johnson, and there had been some tracks issued in Europe, but otherwise this was largely unexplored territory, until OJL released 'In The Spirit N. One' (sic), OJL 12, and 'In The Spirit N. Two' (sic), OJL 13. Bernard Klatzko's booklet notes described who had first enthused him about this music ('McKune at my side affected my sensory perception like a snort of LSD.... [he] was never at a loss for words he talked incessantly, during, between and instead of the music ... [and] invariably brought out many interesting and unknown facts'.)

No wonder the facts were unknown – obscure evangelists, whose stories have only emerged in recent years, like Washington Phillips and Blind Joe Taggart, rub shoulders with bluesmen moonlighting

with sacred songs, as well as preachers like Reverends McGee and Rice. It is astonishing music, bursting with life, burning with faith and fervour. Having said that, you could certainly argue that it wasn't very representative of the recorded African-American religious music of its period, which was dominated by sermons by preachers like Reverend J.M. Gates, and the increasing popularity of a capella quartets. It does seem fair to observe that the lack of interest in quartets shown by this generation of reissue compilers was responsible for the fact that this particular idiom remained largely neglected until the 1980s.

This article is primarily concerned with the series of 21 LPs that OJL issued between 1960 and 1969 (Whelan left the label around 1966 or 1967), which changed the entire landscape of the blues reissue world. At the start, they were genuine innovators, and their influence was huge, not only in developing the audience for this music – who were soon as thrilled by the likes of House and James as were the 78 collectors – but in prompting others to follow their example. By the end of the decade, many other independent labels were releasing compilations of pre-war blues. Some were variable both in musical quality and sound reproduction, and they were often short lived, but others thrived. The most significant was Yazoo, with their thoughtfully-compiled, great-sounding sets of mostly guitar-based downhome blues, run by Nick Perls, another member of that aforementioned 'Mafia'. It was launched (originally as Belzona Records) in 1968, with a set of Mississippi blues that could easily have been a fourth OJL volume.

All of these labels – including Herwin, Mamlish, Blues Classics etc – were surely inspired by OJL's example, not least in how they presented artists whose individual brilliance was very often in inverse proportion to their output. Here is where the accusation of white men writing canons finds its most fertile ground. As it happens, it was in the notes on the Herwin LP 'Patton, Sims & Bertha Lee' in *Blues Unlimited* in 1978 that I first encountered the idea, as Don Kent drew attention to the fact that those who had made Charlie Patton's reputation in modern times were 'predominantly white... middle class' – hardly an original idea for the posturing iconoclasts of the 21st century, then. Referring to Kent's observation in his review in *Blues Unlimited*, Tony Russell responded: 'Ouch! Yaroo!', a reference that would no doubt have mystified non-U.K. readers, including Klatzko and Kent.

After a gap of more than a decade, OJL issued four more LPs: sets by Peg Leg Howell And His Gang (OJL 22), Lonnie Johnson (OJL 23) and Memphis Minnie (OJL 24), and a compilation of music from Georgia (OJL 25), all fine stuff, although released into a market that was far more crowded. Also in the 1980s, they released sets of 1960s recordings by Fred McDowell (OJL 8051), Robert Wilkins (OJL 8052) and Mississippi John Hurt (OJL 8053 and 8054). It may not be so well known to blues fans, but Origin Jazz Library still exists as a label, run by Cary Ginell and Michael Kieffer, featuring CD reissues with high quality sound reproduction, mostly of early jazz and western swing.

A friend was recently griping about collectors who are more interested in dusty old 78s than in the music – I'm sure we've all heard this kind of thing – but in the same conversation, he declared his passion for the music of Washington Phillips. Of course, if it wasn't for those obsessive shellac diggers, he would literally have never heard of Phillips, far less had that sixteen-track CD to enjoy. In the booklet that came with OJL's 'In The Spirit' volumes, Bernard Klatzko paid tribute to the few who were known to collect the kinds of records included in these albums: 'We owe the preservation of Negro country music to these pioneers, all non-conformists ...'. Perhaps it was that non-conformity which attracted them to the work of artists who even in their day, were marginal to an already marginal culture, but we can be grateful that they were. Without the obsession and dedication of such collectors, and of the visionaries like Pete Whelan and Bill Givens, who reissued records that had been quite literally rescued from oblivion, our appreciation of the music we love would be so much poorer.

Sources

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