

PEABODY BLUES
Nehi 01 (77:59)

FURRY LEWIS: John Henry (The Steel Driving Man) – 1/ John Henry (The Steel Driving Man) – 2/ Black Gypsy Blues/ Creeper’s Blues; WALTER VINCENT: Your Friends Gonna Use It Too – Part 1/ Your Friends Gonna Use It Too – Part 2/ Overtime Blues-2; CHARLIE McCOY: It Ain’t No Good – Part 1/ It Ain’t No Good – Part 2; SPECKLED RED: House Dance Blues/ The Dirty Dozen/ Wilkins Street Stomp; JENNY POPE: Whiskey Drinking Blues/ Doggin’ Me Around Blues; ROBERT WILKINS: That’s No Way To Get Along/ Alabama Blues/ Long Train Blues/ Falling Down Blues; GARFIELD AKERS: Cottonfield Blues – Part 1/ Cottonfield Blues – Part 2; JED DAVENPORT: How Long How Long Blues/ Cow Cow Blues; JOE WILLIAMS: I Want It Awful Bad/ Mr. Devil Blues; KID BAILEY: Mississippi Bottom Blues/ Rowdy Blues



These are the blues recordings made at the Peabody Hotel, Memphis by a Brunswick/Vocalion recording unit in September 1929, complete except for the sadly unissued Betty Perkins session and Charlie McCoy’s ‘Last Time Blues’, which is on Nehi 02 (*see review this issue*). These are in fact all the issued recordings by African-American artists made on this visit as no jazz or gospel was recorded. All the missing matrix numbers are presumably by country performers. This issue is not in matrix number order but in this case overlapping sessions would make for uncomfortable listening at times. If the matrix numbers are to be believed then the recording of Part One of ‘It Ain’t No Good’ was followed by ‘Last Time Blues’, then Part One of ‘Your Friends Gonna Use It Too’, then ‘Overtime Blues’ and only then did they get to Part Two of ‘It Ain’t No Good’. Sequencing in this order would obviously not make for easy or even logical listening. A decision to put Furry Lewis first would in any case be forgivable. These are his final pre-rediscovery recordings and rightly regarded as immortal masterpieces, a definitive blues take on ‘John Henry’, which he makes entirely his own, and two highly personal blues. ‘Woman take this ring I give you and you put it on your right hand, and when I’m dead and buried poor gal, you can give it to your other man.’ The personification of vermin has rarely been pursued to such glorious hyperbole as in ‘Creeper’s Blues’. ‘Roaches got to fighting and kicked me out of bed.’

Walter Vinson (whose name Brunswick’s man heard as Vincent) and Charlie McCoy were both recorded with Chatman’s Mississippi Hot Footers, essentially the Mississippi Sheiks, though they had not yet recorded under that name. This archetypal African-American string band turn in two beautifully crafted single entendre hokum two-parters with one of the guitarists producing an almost jug-like bass effect. ‘Overtime Blues’ is an exception to this presentation, a moving blues with a densely textured solo guitar accompaniment. ‘Remember the way you treat poor Walter, it’s coming home to you.’

Speckled Red presents a rather different aspect of the blues tradition and appears almost as an interlude in the company he is keeping. This is the first record of a bowdlerised Dirty Dozens song. That the piano solo manages to upstage it is merely a reminder of just how good this all is.

In my view, Jenny Pope is better than her reputation. Her two intensely personal statements bring with them the mystery of what Georgia Tom and Tampa Red were doing in Memphis. As they are named on the original labels it is difficult to argue with the identification. ‘You’s a mean old bootlegger and now you’re doing me wrong.’ Juxtaposing them with the seemingly effortless dancing rhythms of Robert Wilkins, actually recorded just before, though here put just after, is at least thought-provoking. His light voice, confidential manner, and emphasis on melody combine to make Wilkins one of the great originals. ‘The stern wheel knocking, I’m Alabama bound,’ is surely an image from an earlier age and what should we make of the alligator doing the shivaree? ‘If brownskin women kill me, mama let me go.’ If it’s too long since you actually listened to these (as in my case) give yourself a treat. And what wealths of irony are hidden in: ‘Come and walk with me down to my loving shack tonight. I’ll certainly treat you just like you was white, If that don’t satisfy you, girI I’ll take your life.’

Garfield Akers and Joe Callicott provide an insistent repetitive swing to accompany Garfield's generically titled tale of love and loss. Jed Davenport is much better known for the recordings of his Beale Street Jug Band the following year, though no biographical details whatever seem to have been recovered. As a harp soloist he plays in a highly vocalised style — the chugging and kissing noises heard in 'Cow Cow Blues' are especially striking — with considerable technical skill and emotional power. He is apparently accompanied by the Joe Williams who recorded immediately before him and in turn accompanies him on those tracks, carrying vocalisation to the lengths of singing a female part through the harp on 'I Want It Awful Bad'. (At least I think that's what he is doing!) By comparison, 'Mr. Devil Blues' seems positively conventional. This Joe Williams is certainly not Big Joe Williams. Whether it is one of the other Joe Williamses who recorded later is undetermined.

Kid Bailey's recordings have been described as 'few but wonderful'. Actually these two are all there are. Their sparse accompaniment is definitely subordinate to the singer's passion and soon becomes hypnotic. It's not entirely clear what 'significance' attaches to this apparent cross-section of music in the blues tradition recorded over a few days (Sunday to Wednesday we think) in Memphis in 1929. We don't really know whether it was a cross-section of African-American music in Memphis as we are ignorant of the processes by which artists were selected. I think we can safely guess that a true cross-section would have included a jug band, a point made in Russell Beecher's notes. Luckily we don't need to know. What is certain is that it makes an interesting and absorbing listen. It is, as Beecher says, 'a musical tragedy' that Akers and Bailey in particular left behind such a small body of work.

It comes with a lavishly illustrated booklet with vintage photos of Memphis and the Peabody Hotel and four splendid vintage advertisements taken from Franz Hoffman's *Jazz Advertised* compilations. The image of Speckled Red's 'mistreatin' mama' running away from him is especially delightful. The one for 'Your Friends Gonna Use It Too' certainly mandates the description 'single entendre'. The full-frequency dubbing may be found noisy by some whose personal surface noise filters are not well honed, and revelatory by others.

Howard Rye

The more observant reader may have noticed the anomaly in the picture used for the cover of this CD's booklet: the traffic is flowing on the left hand side of the roads around the Hotel Peabody. As the large hotel sign appears the correct way around, it does not appear that the picture has been flipped. We've mentioned this to the compilers of this release and they are looking into the conundrum, we'll advise if and when ... or does any reader have an explanation? Rev Eds