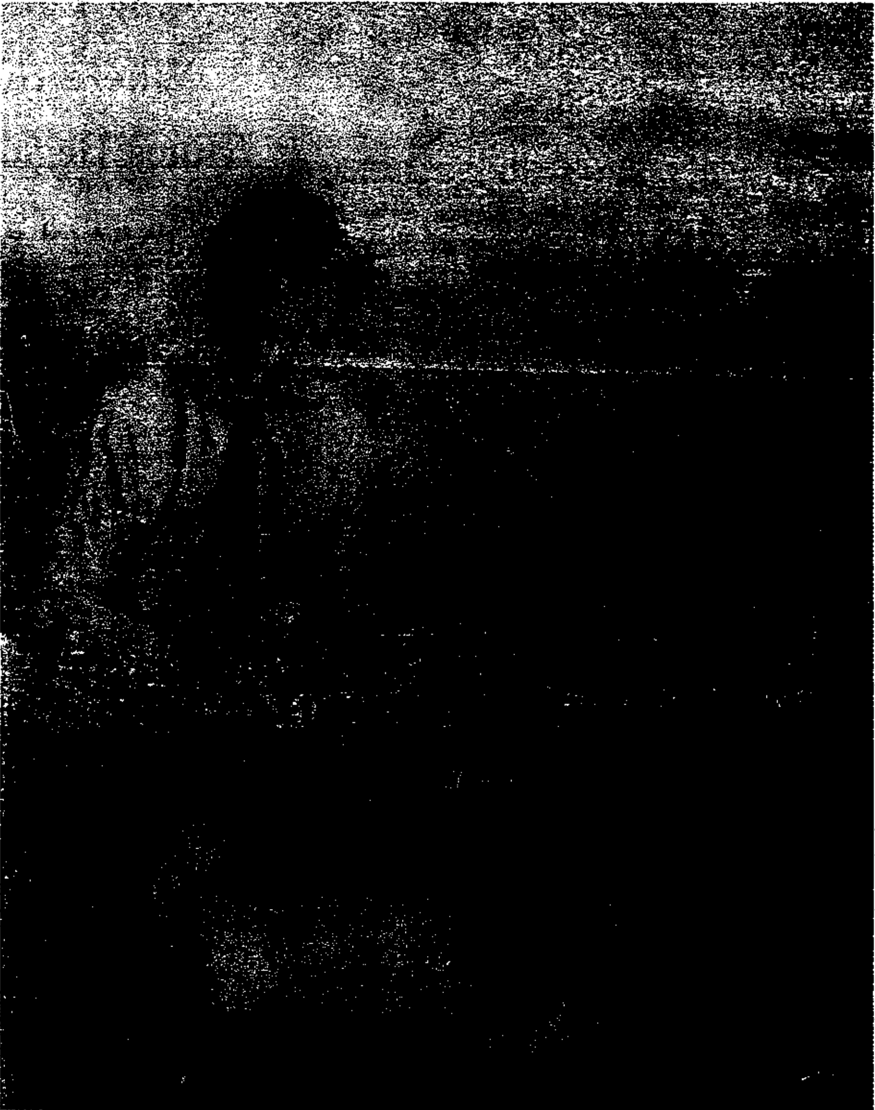

Alan Lomax in 1941

The Land Where the Blues Began

Alan Lomax

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Chapter 6

Rise Up, Dead Man

Rise up, dead man, and help me drive my row . . .

PARCHMAN

Only a few strands of barbed wire marked the boundary between the Parchman State Penitentiary and the so-called free world. Like the plantations on the other side of the fence, the state pen was a vast checkerboard of cotton fields cut by wide drainage ditches and graveled roads, sprawling interminably under a hot sky. The land produced the same crop and blacks had the same work to do on both sides of the wire fence. Only the occasional sight of convicts in stripes and of mounted guards carrying shotguns made one realize that this was a prison. But every Delta black knew how easily he could find himself on the wrong side of that fence. As the great Mississippi prison song ironically puts it:

It ain't but the one thing I done wrong,
I stayed in Miss'ippi just a day too long.

The sharecropper loaded with debts he could never pay, or the muleskinner escaping from Mister Cholly, might not at first care too much which side of the barbed wire he found himself on. True, Parchman was a step deeper into

hell, but he had lived in one of hell's anterooms all his life and as a boozer, a dancer, a petty gambler—a chief devil in the eyes of the community—was well acquainted with the territory. But the pen soon taught him how wrong he was. It was a Marine boot camp where you never made private; boot camp that ran as long as a man's sentence, and that could mean the rest of his life.

The warden and other officials of this penal system had no interest in or knowledge of penology. As a *New York Post* reporter observed, as late as 1957:

> The state penitentiary system at Parchman is simply a cotton plantation using convicts as labor. The warden is not a penologist, but an experienced plantation manager. His annual report to the legislature is not of salvaged lives; it is a profit and loss statement, with the accent on profit.

These officials and their underlings were filled with a zeal for work that might well be called Southern Protestant Colonial; they had a passion for forcing others to labor hard in the hot fields and woods, and were enraged if there was shirking. Hired on because of their high qualifications as "nigger drivers," the Southern penologists joyously and self-righteously humiliated, bullied, beat, often tortured, and sometimes murdered their charges.

When we first visited Parchman, the state-approved instrument of discipline was a broad strip of leather about four feet long and a quarter inch thick with holes punched in the last foot so it would draw blisters from the bare flesh with each blow and break them with the next. This monstrous contrivance was called "the bat," and Joe Savage remembered it from his time in Parchman.

JOE SAVAGE: They whupped us with big wide strops. They didn't whup no clothes. They whupped your naked butt *(laughs)*. And they had two men to hold you.
WALTER BROWN: Four!
J.S.: As many as they need.
W.B.: I walked through the hall, comin out the kitchen, and looked at it. They had one down an four holdin him.
ALAN LOMAX: Did they ever injure anybody that way?
J.S.: Wooo!
W.B.: Yeah!
J.S.: Kill um! Kill um!
W.B.: They'd kill um like that.

Indeed, the state prisons of the South in many ways resembled Nazi concentration camps, both in the way they treated blacks and in their intimidating effect on the black community. Every black knew, at least by hearsay, what "goin down the river" (going to the state pen) meant. Anything could happen to you; you were at the mercy of lawless men who hated "niggers." The horrid shadow of this remorseless system, in which so many men disappeared, lay over the whole South, carrying a threat that has not entirely vanished. Conditions in these state pens perpetuated the worst aspects of plantation slavery and of the "free penitentiaries"—the levee and forced-labor camps. They transformed many of the society's rebels into hardened criminals, some of whom came to prefer prison life, with its security of three squares and known worries, to life in the free world.

The prisoners rose in the black hours of morning and ran, at gunpoint, all the way to the fields, sometimes a mile or more, their guards galloping behind on horseback. At work they were divided into squads, with the swiftest worker in the lead. The others were required to keep pace with him, and anyone who did not keep up, no matter what the reason, was sure of severe punishment. I met one old-timer, respectfully nicknamed "the River-Ruler" because he'd been the leader of the number-one gang on the number-one farm in the penitentiary for twenty years. The River-Ruler's feet had turned into bags of pulpy bones from the long years of pounding the earth of the penitentiary fields. In the words of the song, he had run and walked "till his feet got to rollin, just like a wheel."

Everywhere we heard of men working till they dropped dead or burnt out with sunstroke. "Knocking a Joe," or self-mutilation, was one way out. The sight of a one-legged or one-armed man who had chopped off his own foot or hand with an ax or a hoe was a common one. Those who "made it," that is, served their sentences and returned to their homes intact in mind and body, had to be "mighty tough peoples."

In the burning hell of the penitentiaries the old comforting, healing, communal spirit of African singing cooled the souls of the toiling, sweating prisoners and made them, as long as the singing lasted, consolingly and powerfully one. This habit of group singing throughout all activities is the very core of African tradition. Africa's great rivers were navigated by chanting paddlers. Gangs of singing axmen, with drummers moving in close to spur them on with hot licks, cleared garden spots in the African jungle. Teams of helpful women slapped clay floors slick and hard or brought in their neighbors' harvests with song. Black Saharans crooned to their groaning dromedaries.

On one West Indian island, where family bust-ups were frequent, I recorded teams of professional singing house movers, who came in when a married couple broke up, sawed their little cabin in two parts, and dragged the lady's half to her mother's place, singing as they pulled. The homemade vessels of the Caribbean were launched and sailed to work chanteys that became the delight of sailors in all the oceans, echoing in distant harbors from Blackpool to Bombay. This musically productive choralizing, that had "brought daylight" into the swamps of the Delta, went out of style as the plantation communities began to break up and the people moved to town. Individualized performance types, like the solo gospel song, the holler, and blues, became fashionable among the maids, farm laborers, and service workers, struggling to climb the lowest rungs of the ladder of American success.

But in the prison camps the group singing that had been an essential African heritage of sociability sustained the black convicts, kept them "normal" and humane. This tradition had given birth to a healthy sense of community in the slave quarters. It had produced a soul-cleansing and sustaining black religious tradition, replete with the noble spirituals that soared round the world. It had transformed the rather stiff amusements of Western Europe's country dance tradition into the peppery southeastern Virginia reel and invigorated the choicest Scots and Irish tunes with black syncopations; in which, as in the popular dances of Latin America, the black slave could hear that his audible presence had become a joyous essential in his social surround. He did not have to wait till evening or when he was at leisure to polish these rhythmic jewels; he amused his friends with them on the job, and so was forever discovering the fit of his music to his environment, to his tasks and to his group. This was the way it was in the old days in the Deep South, the old-timers told us. For every task of river, field, then railroad and construction camp, this habit of singing and working together in rhythm had brought forth a packet of catchy tunes that made the work go merrily in spite of the heat. You sang together on the job, and the responsorial hallies had you shouting at meeting time on Sundays. Thus the basic African group-oriented musical style lived on in the United States.

The hoes, the axes rose and glittered—

I'm calling my diamond,
My diamond bladey . . .

then flashed like a single silver blade as they swung down—

They ringing in the bottom,
Drop um down.

and the earth and the forest thundered under their strokes.

Hammer ringin in the live oaks,
Drop um down.
I'm a number-one driver,
Drop um down.
If you drive, I'll ride you,
Drop um down.

So they overtopped their bosses. Often the axmen stood erect as they worked, their axes swinging high and back over their head, coming almost straight down on the logs at their feet and carving out chips like thick golden slices of cornbread.

You could hear the mighty choruses of the hoe gangs a mile away. Close by, as seventy high-swinging hoes moved grandly ahead like some gigantic mowing machine, sweeping the Johnson grass out in huge swaths, the singing could almost take you off your feet. The sound was like a choir of trumpets and trombones, shot through with tricky harmonies, swinging together on the beat. The term "call and response" is inadequate to describe this black group singing. It was composed of many intertwined parts improvised by the singers joining and leaving the chorus as they pleased, stroking in tones, part phrases, and harmonies just where they were needed to round out the blend. Moreover, the leader and chorus parts overlapped rhythmically as the chorus came in under the leader and replaced him until he was ready with his next line. He, in his turn, overlapped with the chorus, as they held their last note, thus creating moments of polyrhythm. Then the leader swept in with a capping salty phrase, calculated to make everyone smile. Indeed, there was often a sound like gargantuan laughter in the overlapping chorus, as they sent their golden harmonies into the hot blue sky.

LEAD: *I've got a bulldog weighs five hundred,*
OVERLAPPING CHORUS: *In my backyard, in my backyard.*
OVERLAPPING LEAD: *When he barks, he roars like thunder,*
CHORUS: *All in the clouds, all in the clouds.*

This intertwined, unified, overlapping style is peculiar to black Africa and African America. It is one manifestation of a group-involving approach to communication that allows everyone present to have an input in everything that is happening. Dance, ritual, work, even conversation, are all performed in this overlapping, participatory way. It animates the basketball court as it does the dance floor. Multileveled conversational style, each level understood and reacted to, is the rule in black folk society. Polyphony and polyrhythm are the natural outcome. In African life each task has its own overlapping songs, and these transform the monotonous labor of agriculture into family or neighborhood celebrations such that village life is like a musical.

This habit of making work into sociable play was continued and Creolized in Spanish, French, and English around the Caribbean. My guess is that black work songs became notably more energetic and anguished in the New World, where slave and forced-labor gangs were driven to complete heavy tasks in quick time in all weathers. Gang labor songs sprang into being wherever conditions were particularly hard, as in the malarial rice-growing islands on the East Coast, on the tunnel jobs that pushed the railroads past the Southern Appalachians, among stevedores on the docks and steamboat landings, in the coal mines of Alabama, and in the fertile, but pestilential and heat-drenched river-bottom lands of the Southwest.

In imagery and historic setting these black work songs are as American as the Yankee Doodle or the Ghost Dance, for they were wrested out of the very rock and earth of the Southern land, as black hands broke the soil, moved it, and brought it into production. While rivers of sweat poured down, these trenchant melodies flamed up out of the passionate struggle with nature and resounded in the cruel Southern heavens. In them the African slave, transformed into steel-driving John Henry, put the Bill of Rights into one phrase:

A man ain't nothin but a man.

Although this tradition of communal song began to decline under the individualizing sharecropping farm system, it continued to flourish in the penitentiaries of the South until they were desegregated and reformed in the sixties. My father, John Lomax, and I, recording in the black state prisons of all the Southern states between 1933 and 1947, not only found a great panoply of original songs but discovered that every state pen had developed distinctive work-song styles. Each of these state styles dramatized the struggle of the work group in some original and often thrilling way, at the same time that it helpfully organized and paced the efforts of the participants. No words can

describe these effects, but their varied texture can be appreciated on field recordings.[1]

This vein of African-American creativity flourished in the state pens because there it was essential to the spiritual as well as the physical survival of the black prisoners. The establishment of exactly the right tempo is the basis of any successful musical performance, but in the prison chants tempo had a far more crucial role to play. The beat established by the song leader set a practical pace for the work in relation to the kind and size of the task, the weather, the capacities and feelings of the gang. The right tempo increased the flow of well-organized energy, lowered fatigue, and boosted morale by unifying the group and thus vastly increasing its productive output.

These ideas emerged during a conversation at a Parchman prison woodpile where the camp's best singers had been brought together to record. Bull and Bama, Dobie Red and Tangle Eye and 22, who had been singing and chopping like musical tigers, paused, dripping with sweat, while Bama explained:[2]

BAMA: We go out about sunup and we sing practically all the time when we're flat-weeding a ditch.

THE GUARD, CLOSE BY: That's right—some of them sing practically all the time.

ALAN LOMAX: And what if you're working in the woods with axes? If you chop all day long, do you sing all day long?

BAMA: Yessir, there'll be somebody singing the whole day long. Everybody that can chop with an ax, he can sing.

A.L.: Do you think you can slack off a little bit when you sing?

BAMA: No sir. What makes it go so better when you singing, you might nigh forget, and the time just pass away. But if you just got your mind devoted on one thing, it look like the day be longer. You know, a man wouldn't have no business to talking on the job, so best just keep your mind on what you're doing and go to singing, and it go better.

A.L.: What's the most important thing about a good leader? Does he have to have a real good voice or a strong voice or what?

BAMA: Well, now it wouldn't just exactly make any difference about the dependability of his voice or nothin like that, boss; but it take the man with the most understandin to make the best leader in anything. If you bring a brand-new man in here, if he had a voice where he could sing just like Peter could preach, and he didn't know what to sing about, well, he wouldn't do no good.

Then here's a fellow, maybe he ain't got no voice for singin, but he's been

cooperating with the peoples so long an been on the job so long, till he know just exactly how it should go, and if he can just mostly talk it and he understand the work so well, it would go good with yuh. No, it don't make any difference about the voice; you can just whistle and, if you know the time and can keep in time with the axes, you can whistle and cut just as good as you can if you were singin. But you have to be done experienced.

A new prisoner, confronting the torture of dawn-to-dark toil in the blazing heat, also faced a musical challenge, which helped him endure his first hellish weeks in the pen; he had to learn how to sing with the prison veterans. These hard boys, who rutted, fought, and killed in overcrowded prison dormitories, could sink their differences, feel the black pride and power of their group, and forget their bitter, bitter cares as their choruses rolled across the field.

I'm choppin in the bottom wid a hundred years,
Tree fall on me, I don bit mo care.

The prisoners all talked about how singing comforted them. One said in a plaintively sweet voice, "When you listenin how the song run, the day just go by mo faster, and befo you know it, the sergeant or the driver is hollerin dinnertime."

I ain't been to Georgia, but I been told
Women in Georgia got the sweet jelly roll.

So the playful eroticism of Africa crept in past the barbed wire and the guards to console the black prisoners. The work-song leaders were always rhyming about the jelly in the biscuit, about women faithless and faithful, women coming with pardons, women forgetting them—women, a worrisome and wonderful thing to a poor prisoner.

Big-Leg Rosie, with her big-leg drawers,
Got me wearin these striped overalls.

When she walks, she reels and rocks behind.
Ain't that enough to worry a po convict's mind?

They sang to little Mattie, counseling her about marriage:

Mattie, when you marry, don't marry a convict man,
Every day be Monday, with a hoe handle in yo hand.

Mattie, when you marry, marry a railroad man,
Ev'y day be Sunday, with a dollar bill in yo hand.

Another leader, nick-named 22 because he was sentenced for twenty-two years, brings in old Dollar Mamie and her expensive tastes, and Bob, who was determined to satisfy them.

Old Dollar Mamie told old Dollar Bob
Dress she want cost a dollar a yahd.

Hush now, Mamie, don't say a word,
You shall have it, if it's in Vicksburg.

It was the quixotically humane practice at Parchman, as in other Southern penitentiaries, to allow well-behaved convicts the opportunity and the privacy to cohabit with their feminine visitors on weekends. The folk theory that you couldn't "hold niggers in the pen without at least a promise of pussy" worked well in practice. The guards and trusties were kept happy with various kinds of payoffs. Wives and sweethearts came visiting; so did prostitutes in plenty, pretending legitimacy. These fancy ladies turned tricks and sold whiskey in sheds and outbuildings. So on weekends and national holidays, some 'victs found solace in the arms of Alberta, Mattie, and old Dollar Mamie. Don't forget Jumpin Judy, immortalized in song for her innovations:

It's Jumpin, Jumpin Judy,
She was a mighty fine girl.
Oh well, she brought that jumpin,
Baby, to the whole round world.

However, it was Rosie who was always on the poor convict's mind. Rosie, little Rosie, *Big Leg* Rosie—the heroine of the Parchman prison farm.

I seen little Rosie in my midnight dreams.
Midnight dreams, Lord, my midnight dreams.

In 1933 forty convicts, assembled by the warden at shotgun point for a Library of Congress recording session, blasted our microphone with their roaring call for Rosie. On return visits to Parchman we tried again and again to capture this powerful sound with hardly adequate equipment. Someday, if ever Mississippi discovers its real cultural roots, all these different versions of *Rosie* we took down over the years will comprise together a magnificent *Rosie* recording. The stereo recording I made in the 1960s will not be the best of these.

By that time the convict chorus had shrunk in size and fervor. Even so, in the 1980s, when work songs were no longer sung at Parchman, I asked a Greenville barroom crowd how many knew *Rosie.* Almost every hand in the room went up: virtually every man there had served time in the pen. So the impossible proved possible. We took some of these crippled-up veterans of the Delta frontier to a site on a bend of their river. They formed up in a ragged line with their heavy hoes, and, staggering a bit, they advanced through the shimmering mirage of heat waves toward the camera, swinging their heavy hoes with the fervor that had cultivated the gardens of Africa and the plantations of the South. And as they reenacted the Parchman field work, they sang to Rosie again—these old derelicts, wobbling under the blast of the sun—with the poignancy and passion of their young, heart-hungry years in the pen.[3]

O Rosie,
O lawd gal.
Stick to the promise that you made me.
Wasn gonna marry till I go free.

Choppin in the bottom with a hundred years,
Tree fall on me, I don bit mo care.
O Rosie,
O lawd gal.

Here is poetry that rings like a hammer on an anvil, that bites the heart, that trills like a bird. Nowhere else in earlier African-American or American folk tradition does one find such disciplined and poignant rhymed couplets. When I transcribe them from field recordings, I am always reminded of the *Greek Anthology*. Indeed, the fire of the Mediterranean *copla* and *stornello* stand in the background of this workman's poesy. And this spare and plangent work-song verse is plainly the main source of the poetry of the blues.

"Good mornin, blues, blues, how do you do?
Good mornin, blues, blues, how do you do?"
"I'm feelin pretty well, good pardner, how are you?"

The skill in devising such telling stanzas had been mastered before the blues began, in the creation of the numberless verses of the work songs. The basis of both types is the rhymed couplet, with a first line variously repeated and a final rhyming line which puts a witty or surprising or powerful cap on the stanza. One man sings of his image of freedom:

I'm going to Memphis when I get parole,
Stand on the levee, hear the big boats blow.

And his buddy ironically rejoins:

You go to Memphis, don't you hang around.
Police catch you, you'll be jailhouse bound.

Movement, going places, transportation were main themes:

Prettiest train that I ever seen
Run from Jackson down to New Orleans.

Here is a tissue of almost nothing, yet it sings superbly. Like most work songs, it caresses the voice, slipping over glottis, palette, tongue, and lips like spring water or good wine. Indeed, prison work chants are the most singable of songs, and I urge everyone who can to try them out for the sheer pleasure of internalizing them. Here's a verse that invokes the magnificence of the Mississippi. The way the group roars *round* and *down* conveys the mighty power of the river and its smoke-plumed packets, beating the water with their huge paddle wheels.

Big boat up the river, turnin round and round,
Struck deep water and she drops on down.

But above all, these prison work songs sound the special despair that burdened the hearts of blacks in the Deep South.

Raise um up higher, let um drop on down,
You won't know the diffrunce when the sun goes down.

I could see the magic wrought by this terse and ardent poetry in its effect on the men who recorded for me that day in the prison woodlot. Their faces blazed with feeling. The songs were theirs—this was their art, re-created as they performed it, following a leader they had chosen and who had to please them or be replaced by another. The leader was weaving a new pattern of verses out of a common stock that was their own, that perfectly stated their feelings, and that differentiated them from their guards and from the free world which was so cruelly punishing them. These songs plumbed the depths of their despair, yet also asserted their determination to endure.

John Henry told his captain,
"A man ain't nothin but a man,
But before I'd let your steam drill beat me down
I'd die with this hammer in my hand."

These men in striped clothes smiled at the good lines. They drove at the work, muscles rippling in the sun, axes biting big chips out of the logs, chips that occasionally rang against the microphone.

Axes walkin, chipses talkin,
All day long,
All day long.

Their overlapping African style allowed every man to contribute to the whole effect—a bit of harmony or an improvised comment (like "Let me hear you now" or "Yes, my Lordy, Lord"), even the syncopation of an ax stroke on the log. In fact, that morning in Parchman this little bunch of convicts came up with a new song in the most overlapped, the most syncopated style I had ever heard, something that they had only recently put together out in the Mississippi bottoms. The older men present were unable to join in on this new polyrhythmic "double-cutting" ax song.

Double cutting allows four men to work together in felling a tree, without any interference or danger to the axmen. They stand in a square round the tree, each man on one corner of a square, facing in—the two men on opposite corners chopping together on beat one, the alternate pair on beat two of the

song. In this way all four axes can be continuously in motion and all four blades can uninterruptedly chip away at the tree, without colliding. It's a beautiful thing to watch, as well as to hear. The choppers stand with legs wide apart, knees bent, leaning way back and beginning their sidewise swings with a twist of the hips, their axes then flying in, gleaming arcs, and biting deeply and precisely into the tree trunk as they turn in toward it. Two golden chips are started by one pair of blades, then immediately carved out as the next pair strikes—axe one and three together, then two and four together, the pairs alternating—in a Delta pas de quatre.

First comes a down stroke of axes one and three:

WHOP! (At once the lead begins on the offbeat, pair one recovering, pair two swinging in.)

LEAD: *Well, it's early in the morn*
OVERLAPPING VOICE: *In the mornin*

WHOP! (the stroke of the second pair of ax blades)

LEAD: *Baby, when I rise,*
OVERLAP: *Lordy, Mama*
LEAD: *Well, it's*
WHOP!
early in the morn

OVERLAP: *In the mornin,*
LEAD: *A-baby,*
WHOP!

OVERLAP: *when I rise.*
ALL: *Well, it's early in the morn*
WHOP!

OVERLAP: *In the mornin,*
ALL: *Baby, when I rise,*
WHOP!

OVERLAP: *Lordy, baby, you have,*
LEAD: *It's I have a misery,*
WHOP!

OVERLAP: *Berta,*

LEAD: *Well-ah, in my right side . . .*

WHOP! . . .

This only approximates the intricate pattern of the "new style" that 22 and his bunch were weaving together. It was tricky and highly syncopated, allowing the singers to improvise rhythmic breaks in opposition to the main beat. Where work-song stanzas are generally brief, these ran to a minute or a minute and a half, like an art song or Far Eastern improvisation or a bop solo.

This poetic style seems to be conceived and practiced according to a *vertical* model, which considers the several simultaneous parts of a black choral rendition and allows space for all present to contribute to the entire effect; here the sonorous and verbal aptness of all the interjections is essential to the whole. Such compositional style is difficult for Europeans, especially north Europeans, to perform or even to perceive—at least without the aid of a diagram or a musical score. But it comes naturally to people raised in the black African tradition.

22, a rather slight, wiry, and shy young man, with a troubled look on his face, kept spinning the song, as the four ax blades dovetailed into the live oak. His first stanza speaks for a half-sick prisoner, roused at dawn for a grueling day of forced labor.

Well, it's early in the morn, in the
mornin /
Baby / when I rise, Lordy, mama,
Well, it's / early in the morn, in
the mornin,
A-baby / when I rise,
Well-a / it's early in the morn / in
the mornin,
Baby, when I rise, Lordy, baby,
You have, it's I have a misery,
Berta,
Wa- in my right side, well-a
R-in-a my right side, Lordy, baby,
R-in-a my right side, Lordy sugar,
Well, it's I have a misery, Berta,
R-in my right side, well-a.

Chorus:

Well-a, it's a Lordy Ro-,
Lordy-berta,
Well, it's Lord (you keep
a-talkin), babe,
Well, it's Lord, Ro, Lordy, Rosie,
Well, it's O Lord, gal, well-a.

Well-a whosonever told it, that he
told a
He told a dirty lie, babe,
Well-a whosonever told it, that he
told a
He told a dirty lie, well-a,
Well-a whosonever told it, that he
told a
He told a dirty lie, babe,
Well the eagle on the dollar, quarter
He gonna rise and fly, well-a
He gonna rise and fly, sugar,
He gonna rise and fly, well-a
Well the eagle on the dollar, quarter
He gonna rise and fly, well-a.

(In the close-knit black community, both in and out of prison, gossip is feared, and the backbiter is hated, even though his lies may be as improbable as the American Eagle taking wing off the quarter or the dollar bill.)

Well, rocks 'n' gravel make-a
Make a solid road, sugar,
Well, it takes a rocks-a, rocks-a
gravel, make-a
To make a solid road, well-a,
It takes-a rocks-a rocks-a gravel,
make-a
To make a solid road, well-a,
It takes a good-lookin woman to
make-a
To make a good-lookin whore,
well-a
It takes a good-lookin woman,
Lord, baby,

(The good song leader knows he must vary the themes of his improvisation from painful to pleasant, from metaphors of anxiety to fantasies of fulfillment.)

(Pronounced "ho.")

To make a good-lookin whore,
Lord, sugar,
It takes a good-lookin woman to
make-a
To make a good-lookin whore,
well-a.

Boys, the peckerwood a-peckin on
the,
On the schoolhouse door, sugar,
Well, the peckerwood a-peckin on
the,
R-on-the schoolhouse door, well-a
Well, the peckerwood a-peckin on
the,
On the schoolhouse door, sugar,
Well, he pecks so hard, Lordy,
baby,
Until his pecker got sore, well-a
Until his pecker got sore, Lordy,
baby,
Until his pecker got sore, Lord,
sugar,
Well, he pecks so hard, Lordy,
baby,
Until his pecker got sore, well-a.

(A raunchy play on words, with the poor white [called peckerwood because he resembles the woodpecker] pecking away at black education so persistently that his pecker [penis] gets sore).

Well, hain't been to Georgia, boys
but
Well, it's I been told, sugar,
Well, hain't been to Georgia,
Georgia,
But it's I been told, well-a,
Well, hain't been to Georgia,
Georgia
But it's I been told, Lord, mama,
Well, it's Georgia women, baby,
Got the sweet jelly roll, well-a,
Got the sweet jelly roll, mama,

(Back to the traveling motif, a visit to Georgia, equally famous for its race prejudice and its sweet, loving women. Shades of Ray Charles!)

Got the sweet jelly roll, Lord,
sugar,
Well, it's Georgia women, baby,
Got the sweet jelly roll, well-a.

Chorus:

Well, it's a Lordy Ro-, Lordy
Rosie,
Well, it's Lord Ro-, Lordy sugar,
Well, it's Lord, Ro-, Lordy Rosie,
Well, it's O Lord, gal, well-a.

On the last chorus, the live oak came tumbling down. 22 and his buddies stepped back, blew on their hands, and grinned. There was back-slapping among the axmen when they heard their recording. They knew they had sung up a storm. Much later, when the record was released, somebody in Harlem found it and, without a word to either 22 or myself, used it to orchestrate Alvin Ailey's *Work Song Ballet.* By now thousands of theater-goers all over the world have applauded this composition from the Parchman woodlot. It is a pity they could not see the dove-tailed pas de quatre for axes performed that day by 22 and his friends Little Red, Tangle Eye, and Hard Hair.

In this anonymous world of the penitentiary, every man is given a distinctive moniker that ticks him off in an apt and sometimes cruel way. This nickname, once slapped on as a joke by a guard or another inmate, can last as long as the convict's sentence, even for life. A fine-looking young mulatto might be teasingly nicknamed "Yaller Gal" and then have to fight off sexual attacks for the rest of his sentence. Our friend Tangle Eye was painfully cross-eyed, but completely accustomed to the guards yelling, "Come up, old Tangle Eye." The Texas singer James Baker was christened Iron Head after a live oak fell on him and he never lost a stroke of his ax or a phrase of his chopping song. The great Leadbelly won his name because of his fabled endurance in the fields as "number-one man in the number-one gang in the Texas pen."

We set down a sheaf of these fanciful black convict nicknames, each one a humorous or witty assertion of the deathless singularity of an individual in the seething anonymity of the prison farms. Each nickname helped to shield a personality from extinction, maintaining the man's privacy by keeping his real name out of prison currency. For these hard-pressed exiles, all dressed alike

in striped clothing and herded like animals by guards on horseback, the nicknames asserted and underscored their identities in the darkness of the penitentiary. Moreover, each man also had his own self-composed, identifying musical signature.

You could hear these personal songs—sometimes no more than a few notes long—coming from far away across the fields. These so-called hollers, which belonged to the same family as the levee-camp songs, were pitched high out of a wide-open throat, to be heard from far off. A convict, by raising his holler from time to time during the long day of toil, could announce his existence and fend off the crushing weight of prison anonymity. His signature song voiced his individual sorrows and feelings. By this means, he located himself in the vast fields of the penitentiary, where the rows were often a mile long and a gang of men looked like insects crawling over the green carpet of the crops. Listening to a holler, some con would say, "Lissen at ol Bull bellerin over there—he must be fixin to run," or "That's old Tangle Eye yonder. He's callin on his woman again."

My father and I recorded scores of these "field hollers" or "old corn songs" or "levee-camp hollers," as they were variously called. They were thickest in the river-bottom country, south and west of Memphis all the way into the river lands of Texas. Most of those we found in the Southeast had been imported from the Delta. You can recognize the Delta hollers because they have a shape different from the majority of black folk songs, which tend to be short-phrased, to conform to a steady beat, and to be performed by groups. By contrast, Delta hollers are usually minory solos, sung recitative-style in free rhythms, with long embellished phrases, many long-held notes, lots of slides and blue notes, and an emphasis on shifts of vocal color. They are impossible to notate and very difficult to sing.

As a youngster, I tried to sing whatever we recorded, with varying success, of course, but I never could do a "holler" to my own satisfaction. I tried for years and finally gave up. Then came the moment when a holler spontaneously burst out of *me.* It was the evening of the day I had just been inducted into the army. On this first endless and awful twenty-four hours in a huge army reception center, when I had been yelled at, put down, examined, poked at, handled like a yearling in a chute, I drew KP. It was a sixteen-hour assignment, in which we KP's helped to set the tables for several hundred men three times in one day and then clean up afterward. Along about eight o'clock that evening my feet seemed to be on fire, every muscle in my body was complaining, stinging perspiration was running into my eyes, and my arms were deep in

greasy, boiling dishwater. I had never been so miserable in all my life, and there were still two hours to go. At that moment, without thinking, I let loose with a Mississippi holler. Loud and clear, my levee-camp complaint rang through that hellish army kitchen:

Well, I asked my captain what time of day,
What time of day?
And he looked at me, good pardner,
Threw his watch away,
Ohhh——, threw his watch away.

A couple of guys looked up, but thank God most of the others were too unhappy to notice. I went on hollering and the sound got better. I got to feeling *good.* All those years and finally those Delta blue notes were coming out of me. Suddenly, the black KP sergeant appeared. I kept whooping and washing dishes. I felt sure I'd be condemned to another day of KP. But all the black sergeant did before he walked off was to say in a kind of nice way, "Hey, man, you sound like you from down home."

I slid more dirty dishes in the water and hollered triumphantly on. Even my feet sort of stopped burning. I sang all the levee-camp tunes I knew, and got in a lot of the right curlicues.

"How come," I asked myself, "how come I can manage these hollers now, when I never could before."

And then a remark of Leadbelly's came back to me. "It take a man that have the blues to sing the blues."

"You've got to have um to sing um—that's purely it, as the feller says." I could sing them that day on KP because my situation resembled that of the black muleskinners and convicts of the Deep South. I was utterly miserable, physically exhausted, totally humiliated by trained experts in humiliation. I didn't dare complain or talk back, because my fate was in their hands. Submerged in feelings of anguish and despair, at last I sort of had the blues, and so I could sort of holler, at least well enough to pass muster with a Deep South drill sergeant.

That experience on KP brought me nearer to the mystery that surrounds the origins of the Delta blues. Tormented by fatigue, overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness in the face of the implacable power of the military, I at last could feel and sing the blues. Of course, my black friends, doing time in the levee camps and the prison farms, lived their whole lives in far more painful

situations than the one that had reduced me to despair on KP. Pushed beyond their physical limits, constantly insulted, unable to talk or fight back, and knowing that no one cared whether they lived or died, their hollers voiced the epitome of despair and, sometimes, rage. In truth, they were like orphans, with both parents dead, left to cruel and indifferent caretakers. Often and again, these case-hardened convicts cried out to their long-dead or faraway mothers, as did Track Horse, a legendary figure in the Texas pen:

Oh it's mama, mama, mama, you don't know,
Oh it's mama, mamaaa——
Mama, you don't know . . .

A great Florida prisoner-composer, Robert McLean, called for his mother to prepare his deathbed:

Mama, mamaaa——(rising into a wild keen)
Come make me a garmeeent——
And make it looong——white and narrooow——

These and other hollers contain original and touching cadences that quite match those of the greatest spirituals. They are as astonishing as if the neighing of horses or the trumpeting of swans had become music. Their wayward strains reveal all sorts of extravagant feelings, and will certainly provide some composer of the future with the language of American dramatic recitative. Some hollers are available on records (see "A Brief Discography"), and I shall do my best to bring the rest before the public.

But thus far they have hardly been noticed—first hidden by jazz, then by Tin Pan Alley, and then submerged in the floodtide of the urban blues, to which they had given birth. The principal blues melodies are, in fact, holler cadences, set to a steady beat and thus turned into dance music and confined to a three-verse rhymed stanza of twelve to sixteen bars. But the unconstrained, improvisatory holler genre remains far richer and more varied, in melodic terms, than the blues.

Into the highly charged pause that followed 22's bopping ax song, there floated Tangle Eye's holler. He had leaned his ax against the live-oak log and, looking wistfully across the Delta plain, he sang in a high sweet voice that at times moaned like an oboe, then leapt into liquid yodeling cries with the fluidity of Sidney Bechet's clarinet. The song told Tangle Eye's story.

Mmmm——hmmmmm——ho, ho, ho, Lawd.
Well, I wonder will I ever get back home?
Hey-hey, oo-hoo, O Lawd,
Well, it must have been the devil that fooled me here,
Hey, hey-hey, for I'm all down and out.

Ay-hey, O Lawd,
Lord, if I ever get back home, I'll never do no wrong.
Well, if I can just make it home,
I won't do no wrong no more.

Mmmm——hmmmmm——
Lord, I left Mae Willie and the baby in the courthouse cryin
"Daddy, please don't go."
Lord, I'll be back home,
Well, Lord, I'll be home one day fore long,
Just wait for me.

Mmmm——hmmmmm——
Lord, I been here rollin for the state so long,
Lord, I'm all down and out.
My friend won't come to see me,
Lord, what's done happen to me?

Mmmmm——hmmmmm——
Lord, if I'd-a listened to what my dear old mother said,
Heyyy——
Boys, she dead an gone,
Lord, Lord, she dead an gone.
Whoo——whoo——what'm I gonna do now?

Years later Roswell Rudd discovered a virtual match for Tangle Eye's holler in a recording from Senegal, an important source for American slaves. When we intercut these two pieces on a tape, it sounded as if Tangle Eye and the Senegalese were answering each other, phrase by phrase.[4] As one listens to this musical union, spanning thousands of miles and hundreds of years, the conviction grows that Tangle Eye's forebears must have come from Senegal bringing this song style with them. This is quite plausible. Ancient British tunes have been found all through America's mountains, as has the French Aquitaine

tradition in the Cajun country. But what is special about this and presumably other Delta holler melodies that caused them to survive when most other African tunes were Creolized, or Europeanized?

Most black African music—in Africa and in the New World—is highly rhythmic, group-performed, and sanguine in tone. The solo lamentation is important only in the zones of total tyranny, such as Mississippi, the kingdoms of Africa, and the empires of Eurasia, where the individual—helpless to resist the tax collectors, the recruiting sergeants, the rabid invader, the brutal bossman—cries out for succor. The regime of slavery, sharecropping, uncertain employment, peonage, imprisonment, and shattered family ties had raised up in the Mississippi male the feelings of the poor man under the bootheel of such ancient tyrannies. Big Daddy had replaced the implacable kings and emperors of the past. Echoes of the age-old Oriental style, somehow handed on by immigrants from African kingdoms to the Delta, provided these hard-pressed folks with the means to voice their despair. And this holler form particularly flowered in the hell pits of prison farms and chain gangs.

Dusk was gathering in the Parchman woodlot. The men were tired and hungry. Jimpson, a wizened little old man who had done no leading all afternoon, began his song, one that voiced the hopes of every man present. Dobie Red, Tangle Eye, 22, Bull, Hard Hair, Little Red, and all the others backed him up, so that his holler rose like a big sad wind into the gathering darkness. It christened Parchman *The Murder's Home*—the murderous home of murder and murderers.

Ain't got long, oh mama, ain't got long, I ain't got long.
Lord, I ain't got long in the murder's home.

Pray for me—oh mama, pray for me, pray for me.
Lord, I got a long holdover and I can't go free.

BAMA

After supper the Parchman recording session moved indoors. We passed through the dormitory alleyway, where the guards sat with their guns, safe behind two rows of thick black bars that rose to the ceiling. Back of these