

FAST FOLK

M U S I C A L M A G A Z I N E

JUNE 1984

VOL. 1, NO. 6

Everybody Should Hear
KOKOMO ARNOLD Sing
Milk Cow Blues
It's The Greatest Record
Ever Made
ORDER NUMBER 7026



Victoria Spivey
BLUES
DIRTY TB
BLUES
BLOODHOUND
BLUES
VICTORIA
SPIVEY
No V-38570
DON'T PUT
THAT THING
ON ME
GIVE ME BLUES
by
CLIFFORD
GIBSON
No V-38572

**Six COLD FEET
IN THE
GROUND**
by Leroy Carr
Record No. 5963



SIX COLD FEET IN THE GROUND and GO
ING BACK HOME.

—MILK COW BLUES—Vocal with Guitar.

GOOD WHISKEY WPA BLUES
BLUES



I'm so glad goodwhiskey has come
back again
Don't have to drink no Meach
No more of this Moonshine
Now I can drink good whiskey
Without being afraid of Dye!
I can walk up and down the street
Without dodgily every cap I meet.

No 2978
Sung by PEETIE WHEATSTRAW
3186

—GOOD WHISKEY BLUES

**JIM
JACKSON'S
KANSAS
CITY,
BLUES**
Vocalion
Record no
1144



W.P.A. BLUES and SOMEBODY
CHANGED THE LOCK ON THAT DOOR!
Vocal—Piano-Guitar-Bass Fiddle Acc.

"Those Dogs of Mine"
**"Ma Rainey's
FANOUS
Corn Field Blues"**

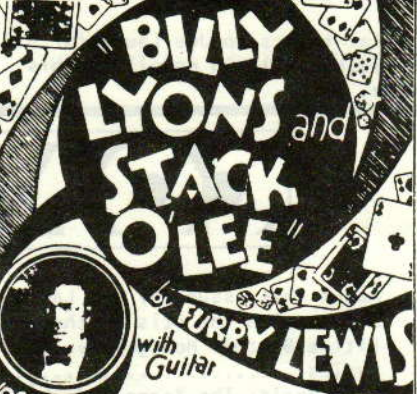


**FIRST
DEGREE
MURDER
BLUES**
Sung by
Lil Johnson
No 3299



Get **LATEST
BLUES HIT!**
on Paramount Record
No 12454
**"RABBIT
FOOT"
BLUES**
By **BLIND LEMON
Jefferson**
Singing his most
Sensational Song

**BILLY
LYONS
and
STACK
OLEE**
by **FURRY LEWIS**
with
Guitar



"Oh, Lawdy, those dogs of mine—
they sure do worry me all the time!"
"Ma" Rainey, Mother of the Blues, sings a Blues that appeals
to every man or woman who wears shoes. Corns—corns—corns
—she had to keep out of the light of the sun—had to walk on the
shady side of the street—well, hear all the details in the Corn-
field Blues. "Ma" Rainey calls it "Those Dogs of Mine."
12215 *Those Dogs of Mine—(Parsons Cornfield Blues)* Madam "Ma" Rainey
12080 *Ma Rainey's Fanous Corn Field Blues* Madam "Ma" Rainey
12098 *Have You Heard Ma's Souvenir Record* Madam "Ma" Rainey

Murder in The First Degree and Scufflin
Woman Blues—Voc.-Piano and Guitar Acc

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Gambling's bad when you lose. But a
new gambling story is always good to hear.
In "Billy Lyons and Stack O'Lee" Furry Lewis,
popular Vocalion blues star, tells us a story of two
gamblers you won't want to miss. On the other
side, he sings and plays "Good Looking Girl Blues,"
a mighty good number, too. Be sure to listen to
this record today!

THE BLUES

A FEW MORE VOCALION HITS!

You Can Get These Records From

A CHAT WITH THE OTIS BROTHERS

by Joe La Rose and Joe Lauro

The Otis Brothers are New York City-based musicians who play an incredible repertoire of early Black American folk music--blues, gospel, rags, hollers, minstrel songs. They play their music on a wide array of instruments, which include guitar, mandolin, fiddle, accordian, bass, banjo, and an odd assortment of homemade and archaic instruments.

The Otis Brothers are single-handedly keeping a fast-dying tradition of folk music alive. Their penchant for authenticity in the creation of this music has them performing on the type of homemade and inexpensive instruments used by the impoverished Black songsters and gospel singers of the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

The Otis Brothers' approach to their music is at once personal and scrupulously idiomatic. They have internalized remarkably the subtleties of long-forgotten styles, and this is evident in their singing as well as playing. For over ten years Pat and Bob have been experimenting with their music, recording it, and digging deeply into the history, lore, stylistic complexities, and mysteries of Black folk music via their immense and ever-growing collections of 78-rpm records, tapes, early cylinder recordings, instruments, books, photographs, documents, and artifacts.

Visiting the home of Pat Conti is like entering a folk music museum. Ancient ragtime and "coon" song sheet music is nonchalantly piled on the coffee table; an original 78-rpm of "Just Beyond Jordan" by Blind Joe Taggart is on top of the bed; and the back room is absolutely crammed with hundreds of stringed instruments, from ancient Martin guitars to homemade, cigar box fiddles.

On my visit to this folklorist's dream of an apartment, where Pat lives (in Queens, New York City), I learned first-hand one of the reasons why the Otis Brothers' music is simultaneously authentic and real. The Otis Brothers are not merely copying old records, lick by lick, but genuinely feeling, relating, and conveying the homespun, rough-edged warmth of this ancient music.



The Otis Brothers: L to R, Pat Conti, Bob Guida, and Louie Kromm

A modest and warm man, Pat Conti is extremely content spending an afternoon playing old records and singing the long forgotten songs that are so much a part of him. Pat, as well, plays old-time hillbilly music with his band, Major Conti and the Canebreak Rattlers.

FF: Describe the Otis Brothers' music

PC: Country music of the more primitive styles, of mostly the black traditions, based on string band recordings and recordings of blues musicians. We experiment with the kind of music that didn't make it, that probably disappeared by the turn of the century, was ignored by the record companies or by field collectors.

FF: Where does the music come from?

PC: Really pretty much out of our own experience playing country blues or country music. Out of our heads arrangement-wise. But again, it's traditional music as we hear it.

FF: Have you had much contact with the older regional performers?

PC: Not so much directly. We've done a bit of recording on our own of some of the people that we've found or been led to. Mostly in Virginia. People who have been the subject of study in say the last ten years. We have interest in the pre-blues form of music.

FF: What exactly does pre-blues music refer to?

PC: Pre-blues, the term, came about, I suppose, for lack of a better term.

Gospel music, work songs, reels, occasionally a very rare ballad--the kind of music that existed prior to the end of the First World War and, in a large sense, still exists today but escaped the commercial interests of the twenties and thirties and the printed word via Anglo-schooled researchers since they first went into the U.S. countryside.

FF: You are, of course, interested in both Black and White traditional music. Do you find a commonality in them?

PC: The most powerful and gifted country musicians of this century have one common thread--they can cite Black sources for the most exciting music. Even the most Celtic-sounding piece takes another dimension, to our ears. You see, the great Irish fiddler, Packie Dolan, came to Chicago in the 1920s to make records. That doesn't make his music American. But in Colonial America, that same kind of migration, when wedded to Black music, makes it American. Bob and I racked our brains for ten years trying to find a missing link--and we came more than just close. There are dozens of them.

FF: I take it you get a great deal of your material from your own collection of old recordings. What kinds of things do you have?

PC: We have a great number of wire recordings on tape, mostly reel to reel tapes that we've accumulated over the past ten years of a lot of material that's on deposit in the Library of Congress. We have, I'd say,

a few thousand of the old 78s that we've dug out of urine-stained junk stores. More often auction lists from other collectors.

FF: Do you and Bob own this collection together?

PC: We consider it a joint effort. My leanings in the collection are primarily the classic string band stuff--in terms of 78s. Bob's kind of absorbed my blues collection early on and expanded on it. I guess we're co-owners. Things go back and forth so much that we really consider it one collection.

FF: You also have the old wax cylinders?

PC: Cylinders are another world of music. Bob sometimes can't take them very seriously, as they contain mostly pop music. But examine the old catalogs--there's an astounding amount of music that at least alludes to rural Black music--and a proper study of it all would take a lifetime. Robert Cogswell, of Kentucky, is one scholar who is trying to make sense of the antique recordings that preceded the classic country blues and hillbilly stuff prior to 1922. Blackface minstrelsy was a great meeting ground in the early part of this century for both White and Black performers. In fact, Bob and I have just made arrangements with a new company that's recently acquired the rights to issue brand new, two-minute wax cylinders, for people who have those machines and want something other than Arthur Fields to play on them. I imagine that's at least three or four customers.

FF: What kinds of instruments do you own?

PC: Bob has really concentrated on cheap, mail-order guitars of the twenties and thirties. It's amazing how few Martins were used by the old timers, and how often they're pictured with the older, cheap stuff. Gibsons are a step up, not as well made, but far more interesting, full of character, and not as overpriced or overrated as expensive Martins. These are the tools that only a handful of the most prominent and successful bluesmen could afford anyway--Martins are. Cheap guitars can do things that the most finely crafted instrument can't touch. That's one reason Bob and I, over the years, have owned hundreds of these instruments, as well as fiddles and banjos. It takes a lot of luck, as we both haven't had regular jobs for very long. But it takes a great deal of searching, too. Any old

instrument, if set up properly, has a job to do. We like them all, unfortunately.

FF: You also have a fondness for homemade instruments?

PC: Once in a while we're lucky to come across these folk instruments. They're usually looked down upon by people into instruments or dealers, real connoisseurs.

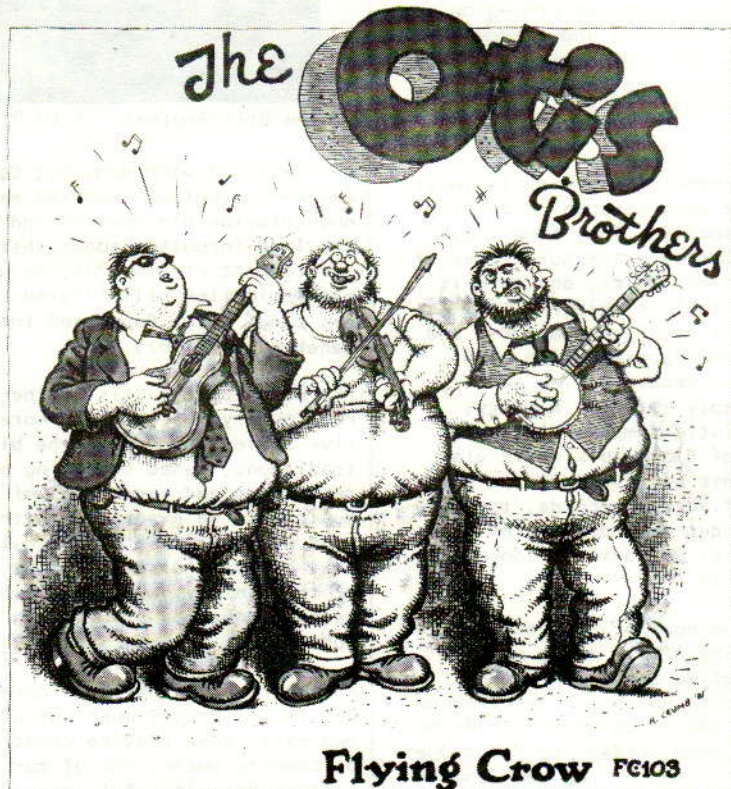
FF: Why is that?

PC: I don't know. It's utterly ridiculous. Those folk things really possess the whole heart and soul of the music. They're just homemade instruments intended for homemade use. It's a shame that more people don't take them more seriously.

FF: Talking about your approach to the music, now--you're very true to the instrument and vocal styles of the original recordings. How important to you is the idea of style, if we make a distinction between style and content?

PC: Well, I think that 90 percent of the content is the style. Just trying to play things in the simplest terms and looking for sounds instead of incredible flights of notes. It's just the timbre or color of different instruments, of speed, altering the wacky combinations of time or just string sounds.

FF: Do you try to reproduce the sounds of the originals?



Courtesy of Don Kent

R. Crumb cover from the Otis Brothers' Flying Crow LP

FF: What are some of these instruments?

PC: The majority of things are fashioned out of cast-off materials. They can be a lard can for a banjo, or a fiddle made out of a kitchen cabinet with a coffee can for a speaker.

FF: And you play them?

PC: We try to play the music that was intended to be played on them. We use them as much as we can, though it's hard to cart around all that stuff. They're really delicate.

PC: Not as far as the Black music goes. Maybe more for the hillbilly kinds of things. But as far as the Black music goes, Bob and I really try to lean away from recreating the things that we're so used to. I feel that it can't be recreated, for obvious reasons.

FF: That comes as somewhat of a surprise. You come closer to an authentic Black sound than anyone else I've heard attempting this kind of material.
PC: Our interest is really not to put something down note for note. We'd

just rather draw on a lot of things that we like and use pieces of things that make those things sound great and try to come up with something different, or something new that sounds ancient.

FF: Why have you chosen to devote your time and energies to the older styles, and not to generalize more or pick up on later things?

PC: Bob and I chose to move deeper into the old stuff because, like the instruments themselves, anything you can or can't possibly imagine, it seems, has been fashioned out of the simplest materials or groups of notes. A group of Kipsigis boys playing raft zithers sounds far more "futuristic" than anything by Karlheinz Stockhausen. The energy in

a record by Curley Weaver in 1929 can match the heaviest metal. And 'primitive' never ever meant 'devoid of complexity.'

FF: A final question. It seems unusual to find serious collectors who are also dedicated musicians. Is it that unusual?

PC: Beats me. Who are you calling a "collector" anyway? You want a knuckle sandwich?

Portions of this interview have appeared in To Be Announced folk magazine.

Note: The Otis Brothers' Flying Crow Records LP is available from Mamlish Records, 835 Carroll Street, Brooklyn, New York 11215.



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