BLUES IN THE ROUND

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As Eddie "Son" House recalled it, traveling with Charlie Patton to his 1930 Paramount Records session was a lot of fun. Patton rounded up House and two other Mississippi Delta musicians, Louise Johnson and Willie Brown, and arranged to have singer Wheeler Ford (of the gospel group the Delta Big Four) drive them to Paramount Records in Grafton, Wisconsin, for Patton's third recording session. Boosting themselves with corn liquor bought early in the trip, the musicians (except for the abstaining Ford) had a raucous time on the road. At one point Johnson and Patton, former lovers, got into a heated argument in the front seat of the car; Johnson put an end to their quarrel by joining House and Brown in the back seat. On their arrival in Grafton, Johnson chose House as her new lover (Perls 1967, 61).

House's "road trip" story as related to Nick Perls has become such a beloved yarn of Mississippi Delta blues lore that it almost eclipses why Perls, with Dick Waterman and Phil Spiro, sought out House in June 1964. Among Waterman's first questions to House upon initial telephone contact on June 21 was whether the older man was the same as the one who recorded for Paramount in 1930 (Waterman 1989, 50). House indicated so, probably with some surprise over his visitors' knowledge about his records. In truth, House's Paramount records, along with Charlie Patton's, were available at the time of the visit on the reissue label Origin.

1. Several historical narratives about Patton and House retell the latter's road trip story at length. The best of these is Obrecht (1992). Robert Crumb (1984) devoted four panels to the trip; he acknowledged use of Palmer (1981, 33).

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Jazz Library. The irony of these events is that the records that House, Patton, Brown, and Johnson made in 1930 were not intended for historical posterity but for the immediate foot-tapping entertainment of a record-buying public.

Blues musicians are not usually considered salesmen of their own music, but maybe they should be. Due to the few opportunities to perform outside their towns and counties and to the musicians' face-to-face familiarity with their regular local audiences, blues performing and listening activities are depicted as communal in oral history, photography, and literary accounts. The same musicians in the setting of a recording studio are almost never thought of as communal, but they could be. When a "community" of musicians is concerned with the objective of making marketable records for home entertainment, the trials and successes of their endeavors can be assessed through their products. Can their records sell themselves without the benefit of widespread advertising? If so, should the musicians be credited for promoting the worth of their music through the strength of their recorded performances?

These questions will be addressed after reviewing the well-known 1930 Paramount session featuring Louise Johnson, Son House, Willie Brown, and Charlie Patton. Some aspects and artifacts of this session have received little attention, but they should be examined. The extensive discography of the surviving takes included in Appendix A will be cited throughout this review; by its example, I hope to demonstrate that discography is a necessary tool for blues research and an insightful means for interpreting recorded blues performances.

Charlie Patton's 1930 Paramount recording session has long been regarded as classic. As early as 1964 Origin Jazz Library owner Bernard Klafter (1964, 8) wrote, "Was this the greatest country blues recording session ever? In my opinion—emphasis on ever?" In recent years the Japanese label Pena Vincetia reissued a series of records from this date as The Legendary Delta Blues Session. While the term "legendary" may be overused in other blues history contexts, it is fitting for this event. It was on this occasion that Louise Johnson and Willie Brown made their only studio recordings under their own names. This was Charlie Patton's third session for Paramount and his last for almost four years. It would be on the basis of these studio discs, along with Alan Lomax's 1941-1942 field recordings for the Library of Congress, that Son House was sought out in

2. See the discography in Appendix B. For a review and appraisal of House written only weeks before his rediscovery, see Napier (1964).

1964 and reintroduced onstage. Two of the Paramount issues from this session have yet to be found, becoming, with the passage of time, the Holy Grail for blues listeners.

Eighteen takes survived from Patton's session with House, Brown, and Johnson. These performances were shaped by the musicians and technicians present at the time of the recording. The first record made was of Louise Johnson, with audible encouragement from the other three musicians; the last was of Charlie Patton performing with Willie Brown. It seems the musicians from Mississippi were allowed to stay in the studio even when not performing, an unusual practice in a time when the typical procedure was to have the nonperforming musicians wait outside in line. Silent technicians monitored the recording of these performances and set them in the form we hear today. Like the people in the studio, we the listeners can immerse ourselves in this historical event by following the takes in the order they were recorded, noting the changes in the music and the personnel, and realizing for ourselves the conditions tacitly understood and accepted by all participants at the time of the session. Thus we may come to understand what was recorded when the microphones were turned on, and at times we can begin to speculate about what occurred while the microphones were turned off.

Appendix A presents the 1930 session in a musical thematic format, tracking composing credits, melodic themes, lyric and melodic transcription, and record issues. It extends the scope of blues discography from the comprehensive listings of Dixon and Godrich (1982), Leadbitter and Slaven (1987), and Leadbitter, Fancell, and Pelletier (1994). Their indispensable discographies are less descriptions of the music and more akin to telephone books, containing names and numbers and occasionally a street name, such as Beale Street in Memphis. Yet, following the example of the telephone book reader who admitted, "True, the plot isn't much, but what a cast of characters" (Hill 1937, viii), listeners and researchers can gain from contemplating the names and the titles. What is more, the record may be located and listened to, enabling some insight into those names and titles. To take one step further, the recording procedures and working conditions may be investigated, toward a realization of why a given record sounds the way it does.

Crucial to an understanding of the Patton session is an understanding of the recording process as it was in 1930. The only studio recording process then in use, from Victor down to Paramount, was a direct-to-disc method that etched the musical performance onto a wax disc called a matrix. The matrix would be the source for the intermediate stampers.

3. Much of the information that follows comes from Munroe, Sheridan, and Kernfield (1988, esp. 357-358). For specific details about the Paramount operation and its own procedures, see Calh and Wardlow (1990), part of an excellent five-article series about that label.
and, in turn, the commercial copies. During recording, the wax matrix disc would spin at a rate of seventy-eight revolutions per minute. The duration of a musical performance depended on the diameter of the matrix disc. The twelve-inch disc could hold as much as four and three-quarters minutes of music, the ten-inch disc, three and a half minutes. Twelve-inch records were fragile and expensive to make, limiting their use to classical recordings. Ten-inch records, despite their shorter playing times, could better withstand the frequent playings to which they were subjected.

So, musicians had to keep their performances down to three minutes per take. Paramount technicians used an electric light system to signal the end of a given take (Tilton 1977b, 22). If the performer indicated that a song would exceed one three-minute side, he or she was sometimes allowed to continue it on a second disc; the two parts of the song would then be issued back-to-back on one commercial record. Edits were not possible. If a mistake was made, the whole song would have to be re-recorded on a new wax disc. Thus, all musicians had to perform without errors for three minutes in order to achieve an acceptable take. Sometimes they had to perform two acceptable takes; since wax discs were subject to breakage, an extra performance would be recorded as a "safety." During the course of a recording session, the studio engineer had to keep track of the various takes. Each song was numbered in ascending consecutive order, with the takes for each song also successively numbered.

The Paramount Record Company’s small size shaped its commercial markets. The Wisconsin Chair Company of Port Washington, Wisconsin, founded Paramount as a side venture to its phonograph cabinet manufacturing. At first, Paramount lacked its own recording facilities, having to use studios in New York (hence "New York Recorded Laboratories" on every Paramount label), Chicago, and Richmond, Indiana. Eventually, in 1929, Paramount recording studios were built within the Grafton factories of the Wisconsin Chair Company.

Since Paramount was not a recording industry giant, it could sign only regional personalities and minor stars. After seeing Okeh successfully launch its "race records" series in 1920, Paramount decided to aim for African-American markets with its own "race" series. Alberta Hunter and Ma Rainey were among Paramount’s urban stars, but Texas blues performer Blind Lemon Jefferson broke open the country blues market in 1926. In its quest for additional country blues talent, Paramount signed Charlie Patton of Mississippi in the spring of 1929 on the recommendation of John Meador, Dean of the University of Mississippi Library, acquired the Spire disc from Wardlow for the Blues Archive.

The label’s contact for locating Patton and other Mississippi artists continued to be H. C. Speir. During late April or early May of 1930 Speir brought a gospel group, the Delta Big Four, to Grafton for a Paramount session. After delivering the vocal group, he met with Paramount president Otto Mooser, who offered his visitor an opportunity to buy the label from the Wisconsin Chair Company for twenty-five thousand dollars. Although Speir was interested in Mooser’s offer, he couldn’t meet the price, as he had made a large investment in an oil well the previous fall. (The oil well proved to be dry, and Speir lost thirty thousand dollars as a result [Wardlow 1993b, 25].)

While the Delta Big Four were taking a break, recording director Arthur Laibly allowed Speir to speak into the studio microphone for a test record. Laibly also asked Speir for Patton’s address; Speir replied that Patton at the moment was living in Lula, Mississippi, adding that other business commitments prevented him from going there to speak to the man (Wardlow 1993b, 25). Determined, Laibly himself went to Lula by train, extended to Patton his invitation to record, and asked him

5. The recording matrix numbers for Speir’s test were L-314-1 and L-314-3. Numbers L-312, L-313, and L-315 through L-320 were used for the Delta Big Four (L-317 remains untraced). On his test, Speir read headlines sating then-governor John B. Bass from Mississippi newspapers dated April 19 and 26, 1930, which he had brought with him. As only these two consecutive issues of a regional newspaper were available, a recording date after April 26 seems unlikely for this test and hence for the Delta Big Four session. Paramount gave a hundred copies of the test to Speir, who gleefully gave them to his music store customers after his return to Jackson. During the late 1960s, Speir gave researcher Gayle Wardlow the last surviving, and only known copy of the test. In 1995, upon my recommendation, John Meador, Dean of the University of Mississippi Library, acquired the Spire disc from Wardlow for the Blues Archive.

6. According to Calt and Wardlow (1998, 213), Laibly supposedly sent a telegram to Speir inquiring about Patton after the Delta Big Four session.
to bring along any musicians of sufficient talent. For trip expenses, the
record executive gave the musician a hundred dollars (Calt and Wardlow
1988, 212–215). Patton had long known Willie Brown, had just met Son
House, and remembered Louise Johnson, a piano player at the Joe Kirby
plantation. He gathered everyone together and asked Delta Big
Four-member Wheeler Ford to drive them to Grafton.

The exact date of Patton's third session remains unknown. Estimating
the total length of time taken by Laibly to arrange a train trip to Lola and
by Patton to contact the other musicians as three to six weeks, a likely
date could have been any time between May 25 and June 14. The takes
waxed by Johnson, House, Brown, and Patton span the Paramount
matrix numbers L-398 through L-433. The session must have been held
before September, since engineer Anthony Olinger recorded on matrix disc
L-503 for the ninety-third birthday of Wisconsin Chair president J. M.
Bostwick Sr. Between the Spedr test (L-314) and the Bostwick disc (L-503)
is L-348-2, containing “You've Got What I Want” performed by Irene
Scruggs. For many years, Scruggs kept a test copy of that disc with the
recording date of May 28, 1930, inscribed on the label. By inference, the
Patton 1930 session takes are thought by many to have been made on or
about May 28, although there is nothing to disprove that the Mississippi
Delta musicians were actually there in July or even August. In consider-
ation of Laibly's contacts with Spedr and Patton when setting up the ses-
sion, the present account and discography place the recordings between
May 28 and June 14, 1930, but allow conjectures through August 1930.

Their road trip aside, what exactly did Louise Johnson, Son House,
Wille Brown, and Charlie Patton, with the supervision of Arthur Laibly,
do during the session itself? To attempt to answer this, the records will be
examined in matrix number order, the same order in which they were
recorded, presuming that Laibly and his studio engineer did their work
correctly.

7. The label from the Bostwick birthday disc was reproduced in Calt and Wardlow (1982, 21).
8. Dixon and Godrich (1953, 555) described the hand-dated Irene Scruggs test disc in con-
nection with her Paramount release of “You've Got What I Want,” but they prudently gave
“c. July 1930” for the Patton, House, Brown, and Johnson sides. In later editions, however,
the House, Brown, and Johnson performances are ascribed the specific date of “Wednesday,
28 May 1930” (1959, 119, 325, 374; 1962, 122, 340, 391), while Patton's are given as “c. 28 May
1930” (1969, 550; 1982, 581). The possibility that the date, specific or approximate, for the
Patton session discs could have been borrowed from the Scruggs test was pointed out by Hall
and Noblett (1975a).
9. Hall and Noblett (1975b) reported that “Son House remembers the session as being in
August.” I have yet to trace House's quote if Hall and Noblett took it from a printed source.
Nevertheless, given the dates of the respective Spedr, Scruggs, and Bostwick test matrices, it
is conceivable that Patton and his fellow musicians went to Grafton in August.

Example 1. Louise Johnson, “All Night Long Blues,” take 2 (L-398-2), opening vocal chorus with Patton’s interaction

Louise Johnson performed first, playing two takes each of “All Night
Long Blues” (L-398) and “Long Ways from Home” (L-399), titles that
share the same melody and several lyrics. Both takes of “All Night Long
Blues” have survived, demonstrating the practice of recording an extra
safety in case the first master was damaged. The first take was acceptable
and indeed released; but as a precautionary measure, a second take was
recorded, in which Johnson left out the piano solos she performed in the
first take. The lyrics borrow somewhat from Anna Jones's “Tirzite Blues”
and other recorded blues, but the manner in which Johnson played and
sang the song is reckless, humming with the piano figures and shouting,
almost bursting: the melody beyond recognition. The encouraging
shouts from House, Brown, and Patton add greatly to a raucous atmos-
phere, not unlike those in the Delta barrelhouses. Patton showed himself
especially deft at spurring her, to the extent of interjecting a response in the
middle of a phrase (see Ex. 1).

After Johnson's first efforts, there is an apparent blank for the next
eight matrix numbers from L-400 to L-407, except for L-403 and L-404,
which contain performances by a military band (performing “U.S. High

11. The lyric, “blues all round [one's] bed,” may be found in recordings by Memphis and
Mississippi blues performers of this period, such as Frank Stokes with Dan Sane (“Sweet
to Mama,” 1927), Memphis Jug Band (“Crude Oil Blues,” 1928), Tommie Johnson (“Lonesome
Home Blues,” 1928), and Johnson Breeze (“Straight Full of Blues,” 1929). Louise Johnson's
use of these words, together with her lyrics to “On the Wall,” place her firmly in the
Memphis and Mississippi blues contexts.
12. At one point, there was some doubt about whether Louise Johnson accompanied her-
self at the piano or merely sang in front of an uncredited pianist, C. L. Allen. Lebow, in con-
versation with John Cusack, claimed to have been the pianist on the Louise Johnson sides
(Groome 1970). Son House (1965, 41) referred to Louise Johnson as “the girl playing the
piano,” and Noblett (1975a; 1975b) listened to Johnson's recorded performances, com-
pared them to representative sides by Lebow and other pianists, and entered his own
comments in the record.
School March" and "Spirit of '98" [Vreede and Van Rijn 1996, 73]. No cause for the break in recording has been documented, and the missing numbers are untraced in the other Paramount "race" issues. Two writers on piano blues, Hall and Noblett (1975b, 21–22), noted speed irregularities (Johnson's sides sound in F-sharp, an unusual key that would force the pianist to play mostly black keys), and they suggested that the session was momentarily stopped for repairs to the recording equipment. If this is true, the Mississippi musicians may have taken an extended break, during which repairs were made and the military band recorded some takes.

When the Mississippians returned to the studio, Son House took his turn at the microphone, accompanying himself on the guitar. "My Black Mama" was based on a melody by James McCoy that House heard near his birthplace, Lyon, Mississippi (Wilson 1966b, 2–3; Groom 1966, 6). It was recorded on two sides for back-to-back issue. Often noted are the "Death Letter" verses on part two, which can be traced back to Ida Cox's 1924 Paramount recording. "Death Letter Blues." This "death letter" concept was treated also in records by Lottie Kimbrough, Romeo Nelson, John D. Cox, and Papa Harvey Hull.

A few years later, House recorded the two parts of "Preachin' the Blues." For the melody, House borrowed another tune from James McCoy and added his own verses (Wilson 1966, 2–3; Groom 1966, 6). Much has been made of this piece concerning House's connection with the blues and the church (see Charters 1967, 65). The recording went well, with the first takes of each part approved for issue. Interestingly, during the fifth chorus of the first part, a muffled noise can be heard, perhaps one of the nonperforming musicians in the studio. 18

I verified these pitch irregularities myself while transcribing the incipits for the thematic discography.


18. The muffled sound occurs between the lines "Yeah, a heaven of my own" and "Certainly I'll give all my women a long happy home." In his lyric transcription, MacLeod (1994, 26–27) transcribed the sound as "Wait for it. Follow me," and added the note, "The quiet speech (by another) suggests a verse from the same Washoe." Checking several reissues of the well-worn, unique surviving 78 rpm copy, I could not make out any distinct words. My opinion is that the noise was made by a witness, perhaps Brown, Johnson, or Patton, and yet only House was performing.

19. The nature of Brown's musical accompaniment behind Kid Bailey is still a matter of debate among researchers (see Evans 1993; and Wardlow 1993a, in response).

20. MacLeod (1994, 29) interpreted the strum word two different ways: as "end," an instruction to complete the side, or as "and," the first word of a new vocal chorus that Brown realizes he has to sing.

21. Although Patton used the "Maggie" theme as the melodic basis for several recorded performances (including "Screamin'" and Holdin' the Blues" at his first session), he never committed the original song itself to wax (see Jann and Godrich 1982, 66–67).


23. I am indebted to collector and historian Richard Hite of Memphis for verifying the location of the Monarch Saloon and the proper spelling of its proprietor's name. Jim Kinnane was also the subject of a Robert Wilkins blues, "Old Jim Can't's" [sic], recorded in 1935 for Vocalion but not released until the late 1960s.
gets some encouragement for "On the Wall," but she alone is heard for her last side. "By the Moon and Stars" is based on "The Forty-Fours," a melody widely shared among black southerners of the 1920s including Eurlane "Little Brother" Montgomery, who recorded a classic version of the theme as "Vicksburg Blues" in 1930 (Curt zur Heide 1970, 19-20). Both of these Louise Johnson recordings sound in the key of B-flat, apparently free of the studio equipment problems that may have caused Johnson's earlier sides to play back in E-flat.

Another four matrices slip by, and then comes "Dry Spell Blues" by Son House. The two parts of "Dry Spell Blues" were the most troublesome sides to record, requiring four and two takes, respectively. Although this is an original composition by House, its chant-like phrasing is similar to that of "Preachin' the Blues" and to the axe-songs hollered by field laborers. The most likely reason for the retakes is that the piece is a tricky one to perform, with its musical phrases cut short and dovetailed together. The result is an urgent but unhurried performance.

The drought that inspired House's "Dry Spell Blues" and, as will be examined below, Charlie Patton's "Dry Well Blues" was still persisting at the time of the session, and its aftereffects would linger through March 1931. Much is known and has been written about the other great Mississippi Delta disaster captured in blues, the 1927 Mississippi River flood, but little is known about the 1929-1931 drought. However, the American Red Cross (1931) published a report on its drought relief work, opening with these dramatic lines: "The drought of 1930, which parched the fields of 1057 counties in twenty-three States with severe reactions in the early months of 1931, was the greatest calamity of its kind in the country's history."

As early as March 1930, rain shortages were noted in West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. During the time of this recording session, Mississippi was receiving forty-seven percent of its normal rainfall. In August the drought had gained the press' attention and President Hoover's concern; he appealed to Red Cross Vice Chancellor Ernest F. Bicknell for drought relief, and he also opened the farm-credit facilities. By June 30, 1931, the Red Cross aided some 2,765,000 people (American Red Cross 1931).

For Son House as a field hand and for Johnson, Brown, and Patton as musicians supported by the field hands, this drought affected their earnings and outlooks in different ways. The fervent narrative of House's

24. Charters (1967, 64-65) discussed only "Preachin' the Blues" with the axe-songs, but "Dry Spell Blues" also has the "Istiation" rest that Charters identified in "Preachin' the Blues," and hence, it too is relevant, if not related, to the axe-songs and other field hollers. 25. Daniel (1977) presented a general history of that flood, while Briggs (1989) identified specific recorded blues about it.
that some listeners interpret them as sentiments longing for a home or refuge (Talmor 1981, 84-85). Since "Bird Nest Bound" is the last performance of the session, Patton could just as likely be signaling to Brown, House, and Johnson that it was time to pack up and head back to Mississippi. After all, Patton always showed himself to be a musician for all occasions through his songs.

"There is one remaining take, a rather odd one at that: Son House and Willie Brown playing a blues featuring lyrics about walking. This was never released by Paramount but survived on a test disc found fifty-five years after the session." 28 The disc itself has no matrix number, so it is difficult to place the item within the context of the session. Patton biographer Gayle Wardlow (1994) suggested placing it at L-412, which seems plausible, as L-412 is between House's "Preachin' the Blues" and Brown's "M & O Blues."

After the musicians were paid, they quietly returned to Mississippi. The records were released with little fanfare; a Paramount promotional list for October 1930 included Son House's "Dry Spell Blues," parts one and two, among its "New Releases" (see Vreede 1971, opposite item 12991). No other announcements for this session's releases are known or readily available. "Race records" generally were selling poorly, in large part due to the Depression. Paramount compounded their poor sales with worsening distribution; by the end of 1931 not even H. C. Speir could get Paramount 78s for his store (Calt and Wardlow 1992, 22). For many of the titles described in this study, only one copy exists; each was located not in Mississippi, but in the tobacco and apple regions of Virginia and North Carolina, where the workers had money for records. 30

Young Mississippi musicians Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf learned some of the Delta songs recorded in Grafton not from the musicians but from the musicians who made them. Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters adapted House's "My Black Mama" melody and the "Walking Blues" lyrics to suit their respective musical purposes. Johnson recorded his version of "Walking Blues" on November 27, 1936, and saw its release on Vocalion the following year (LaVere 1990). In 1941, in the presence of Alan Lomax and John Work, Muddy Waters performed "Country Blues" and discussed its origins (see Muddy Waters 1993). To be sure, Waters admitted he was familiar with Johnson's "Walking Blues" release, but he pointed out that he learned the tune from Son House himself. Waters' contemporary, Howlin' Wolf, on the other hand, was taught by Charlie Patton (Welding 1967, 20-23), and elements of Patton's songs remained in Howlin' Wolf's repertoire throughout his career (see Howlin' Wolf 1952). For example, the enigmatic opening lyric of Howlin' Wolf's 1956 classic "Smokestack Lightning" ("Smokestack lightning, shining just like gold") turns out to be a compression of Patton's fifth vocal chorus from "Moon Going Down" ("Lord the smokestack is black and bell it like, bell it shine like, bell it shine like, bell it shine like gold"). Later in their lives, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf left Mississippi for Chicago, and by 1960 both were mainstays of Chess Records and the local club scene.

During the late 1950s and the early 1960s, inquiries about pre-war Mississippi musicians began to be made. As scratchy copies of old 78s were recovered one by one, they were hailed as historical recorded documents of aging or deceased bluesmen not just as the entertaining footfall performances they were originally intended to be. From the first, the records from Patton's Grafton session were regarded as musically and historically significant, and no effort was spared to bring them back into circulation. From 1961, "the Origin Jazz Library label began reissuing Patton's records, through 1965, when the "Walking Blues" test was found, the performances from this late spring 1930 session were uncovered bit by tantalizing bit.

Two discs have yet to be found. One is Paramount 13099, a Willie Brown release with "Kicking in My Sleep Blues" and "Window Blues"; the other is Paramount 13096, pairing "Clarksdale Moan" and "Mississippi County Farm Blues" by Son House (Vreede 1971, items 13096 and 13099; Dixon and Godrich 1982, 122, 341). Fortunately, House performed the latter title for Alan Lomax in 1942, thus preserving the song. 29

House based his "Mississippi County Farm Blues" on the melody of Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," and therein lies an interesting story. House recounted to Alan Wilson (1966, 5) that during the Grafton session, the "recording engineer" (probably Laidley) announced that Jefferson had died and asked if anyone knew any Jefferson songs to record toward a tribute release. In response to that

28. The discovery by Michael Kinola of the "Walking Blues" disc and other previously unknown treasures is described in Hilbert (1989).

29. Son House (1965, 41) told Julius Lester that he was paid forty dollars for the session, the equivalent of a year's work in the cotton fields. However, Patton received forty dollars per side after his first session in 1930. Calt and Wardlow (1992, 16) reported that Laidley wished to pay fifty dollars per side to Patton and each member of his contingent for their respective efforts; if so, House may have actually recived no less than three hundred dollars.

30. As one who has traded with collectors for over thirty years, Gayle Wardlow generously shared with me in June 1994 the facts behind the discoveries of rare and unique copies of blues records, including those examined in this study.


request, House recorded his "Mississippi County Farm Blues." At first glance, House's account of the song's origin invites a little skepticism, as Jefferson was found dead in December 1929, but a look at Paramount's Jefferson releases and related advertisements in 1930 may uncover some grains of truth to the story (see Vreede 1971; Cali and Wardlaw 1992, 22). At the time of his death, Blind Lemon Jefferson was Paramount's biggest star. The label probably realized that sales would drop if the news of his demise became widespread, so it continued releasing and advertising new Jefferson records as though he were still alive. As late as March 29, 1930, Paramount ran an ad in the Chicago Defender referring to Jefferson in the present tense: "Blind Lemon Jefferson says 'Southern Women are hard to beat' and he ought to know." Additional Jefferson discs from his last session appeared the following May and June; only in July was a trib-ute record announced to Paramount dealers.\(^{33}\) If House was indeed in Grafton in June, his story of learning about Jefferson's death at that time may be true.\(^{34}\)

... * * * *

Returning to the questions guiding this study, did these records by Patton, House, Brown, and Johnson sell themselves without widespread advertising? Certainly not to the buying public of the Depression but definitely to the collectors of subsequent decades who discerned musical merit in each 78 rpm disc they saved; it is entirely due to these collectors that everything from this session survived. And were these musicians personally credited for promoting the worth of their music through the

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33. Paramount 1945, with Walter and Byrd singing "Wasn't It Sad About Poor Lemon" on side A (matrix 1-276) and Rev. Emmet Dickerson preaching "The Death of Blind Lemon" on side B (matrix 1-277); the disc's matrix numbers suggest an approximate recording date of late March or April 1930.

34. There are two grounds for House's apparent claim to have met Jefferson himself. Charters (1967, 188) tells us that "Son House has said that he met Leon in the studio in Fort Washington the day before Son recorded in July, 1930," then recounted House's story about when he learned of Jefferson's death. House didn't mention actually meeting Jefferson to Alan Wilson (1966), but he inadvertently dropped Jefferson's name to Perls and Cali (1967, 41) while describing the hotel arrangements at Grafton: "House: 'Me and her [Louise Johnson] stayed together in our little room. So Charlie and Willie and this other boy ...' Perls and Cali: 'Wheeler Ford?' House: "Lemon. Lemon Jefferson. Like in this room. Charters in the next one. Willie in the next one. Then me and Louise, we had the one that's facing the street. That's the way that was." House didn't mention Jefferson again, and instead of following up with questions about the possible encounter, his interviewers asked about the guitars used at the session. Charters (1991, xi) acknowledged Nick Perls as a source. If what Perls showed Charters was the same interview that was later published as "Son House Interview—Part One" (1967), his mention of Jefferson was the basis of Charters's indication that House and Jefferson met.

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35. This essay's title, "Blues in the Round," can be read in three different ways. First, four Mississippi musicians created a circular rapport among themselves while working in a Wisconsin studio, thus producing a remarkable series of records. Second, the shape of a disc on which these and all other blues performances have been issued, whether 78, LP, or CD, lends a tangible meaning to "in the round." And finally, a record being a secondary document of the immediacy of the performer himself (the ideal primary source), a circular path may be traced from the recording performer to the record and back to the performer, even if, as was the case of Son House, that path had to take more than thirty years to return to the starting point.

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36. A reproduction of Brown's death certificate is given in Wardlaw (1986, 6).
REFERENCES


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House, Son, as told to Julius Lester. 1965. I can make my own songs. Sing Out! 15, no. 5 (July):38-45.


Petchin' the blues. 1965. Sing Out! 15, no. 3 (July):46-47. (Melodic transcription by Ethel Bain.)


Komara • Blues in the Round

Appendix A

Catalog of Charlie Patton’s 1930 Paramount Session

This catalog is arranged in matrix number order of the session takes, with the unnumbered “Walking Blues” test disc placed after the last numbered matrix. The header information for each recording includes the name of the composer, taken from the label of the original issue; the title of the piece recorded; and identification of the form of the work. When known, the composer of the melodic source is noted. The header information concludes with a note about additional performers on the recording.

For each recording, the matrix number of the take is given, together with the metronome speed and duration of the performance. The tempo measurements were taken during the first two choruses of the performance in question; however, during any one of these recordings, the tempo increases from one chorus to the next. Durations are given in minutes and seconds. These are followed by an identification of the order and function of the choruses in the performance, together with incipits for one or more choruses. Blues chorus structures are in standard lengths of eight or twelve measures, according to the musical and lyrical phrases. Rural blues performers, then as now, typically add or subtract measures to individual phrases during any chorus, and Charlie Patton and his associates were no exception to this practice. The melodic incipits were transcribed at recorded pitch by the author. They are intended to be illustrative and helpful in identifying the performances. Incipits for performances by Eddie “Son” House are used by permission of the House estate.

Readers should take a possible pitch discrepancy of one semitone into account while examining the various reissues and the noted transcriptions. Such pitch differences may be due to recording equipment problems (Hall and Noblett 1975b, 21–22), to Patton’s practice of tuning his guitar sharp for timbral brilliance (Calt and Wardlow 1988, 182), or to decisions made during the LP and CD transfer processes.

Information about each take is concluded by a list of the issues on which the performances may be found and a list of sources of transcriptions of the lyrics and, where pertinent, the melody. Details about the issues may be found in Appendix B, and full citations for the references to the lyric and melodic transcriptions may be found in the References list.
Comments on the Session

The 1930 Paramount recording session most likely was held between May 28 and June 14, 1930, although it could have been held in July or even August. Arthur Laidly was the recording director who supervised the session, which, as mentioned in the body of this article, seems to have been conducted with extended rest periods, during which other musical acts used the studio. A repair break also was probably taken after matrix L-399 to fix the technical problems that produced pitch irregularities on the matrix discs.

The collected surviving session takes, except for the second take of "All Night Long Blues" and "Walking Blues," have been issued in matrix number order on The Legendary Delta Blues Session (Pee Vine PCD-2250).

The Catalog

Paramount Records session, Wisconsin Chair/Paramount factory studio.
Grafton, Wisconsin
Possibly last week of May or first two weeks of June 1930, but not after August 1930
Participants: Willie (Willie Lee) Brown, guitar and vocal
Eddie "Son" House Jr., guitar and vocal
Louise Johnson, piano and vocal
Charlie (Charley) Patton, guitar and vocal

The Session Takes

"All Night Long Blues" (Louise Johnson). 12-bar blues; vocal interjections only from Brown, House, and Patton

a. L-399-1; J = ca. 128; 3:02
Choruses: Johnson piano; vocal (4); piano; vocal (2); coda (2 mm.)
Beginning of Johnson's first vocal chorus

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Well men... partly near all night long... etc.
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Beginning of Johnson's second vocal chorus

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Well men... partly near all night long... etc.
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Note: Incipits transcribed at recorded pitch; the performance more likely was played in the key of F or G major.
Lyric transcriptions: Anonymous 1990; Taft 1983, 144
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b. L-398-2; J = ca. 128; 2:56

Choruses: introduction; Johnson vocal (6); coda
Beginning of Johnson's first vocal chorus

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Foster (speaking): Well?
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Beginning of Johnson's second vocal chorus

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Foster (speaking): Well?
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Beginning of Johnson's second vocal chorus

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Well men... partly near all night long... etc.
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Note: Incipits transcribed at recorded pitch; the performance more likely was played in the key of F or G major.
Issues: Document DL 552, Document DOCID 5321

"Long Ways from Home" (Louise Johnson). 12-bar blues; vocal interjections only from Brown, House, and Patton

a. L-399-1; unissued, presumably lost

b. L-399-2; J = ca. 128; 3:27

Choruses: introduction (4 mm.); Johnson vocal (4); piano; vocal; coda
Beginning of Johnson's first vocal chorus

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Last I wake up this morning, blues all 'round my bed etc.
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Note: Incipits transcribed at recorded pitch; the performance more likely was played in the key of F or G major.
Issues: Paramount 12992, Document DL 552, Document DOCID 5321
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Beginning of Johnson's second vocal chorus

\[ \text{\textit{Note: Incipits transcribed at recorded pitch; the performance more likely was played in the key of F or G major. It also is likely that the session was stopped at this point so that problems with the recording equipment could be corrected.}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Issues: Paramount, 12992, Document DLP 552, Document DOCD-5157, Magpie PY4417, Milestone MLP 2018, OJL-11, Roots RSE-5; Yazoo 2002}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Lyric transcriptions: Anonymous 1990; Taft 1983, 144}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Matrix numbers L-400 to L-402 are untraced, L-403 and L-404 are performances by the Broadway Military Band (Vreede and Van Rijn 1996, 73), and L-405 to L-407 are untraced.}} \]

“\text{\textit{My Black Mama II}}” (Eddie “Son” House Jr.). 12-bar blues; based on a melody learned from James McCoy near Lyon, Mississippi; performed by House alone

\[ \text{\textit{a. L-409-1; unissued, presumably lost}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{b. L-409-2; } j \text{ ca. 112; 3:15}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Choruses: introduction (4 mm.); House vocal (8)}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Beginning of House’s first vocal chorus}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Issues: Paramount 13042, Biograph BLP-12040, Document DOCD 5002, Fyght LP 102, OJL-2, Roots RSE-5, Wolf WSE 116, Yazoo L-1079, Yazoo 2002}} \]


\[ \text{\textit{Note: Charter’s lyric transcription (1963, 10) is of House’s 1942 Library of Congress recording.}} \]
"Preachin' the Blues I" (Eddie "Son" House Jr.), 12-bar blues; based on a melody learned from James McCoy near Lyon, Mississippi; performed by House alone

a. L-410-1; j = ca. 112; 2:59
Choruses: House vocal (6)
Begining of House's first vocal chorus

Issues: Paramount 13013, Biograph BL-12040, Document DOCD 5002, OJL-5, Rhino R2 71130, Roots RSE-5, Wolf WSE 116, Yazoo L-1073, Yazoo 2002


Melodic transcriptions: Basiuk 1976, 50-51 (guitar accompaniment only); Charters 1967, 64 (first vocal chorus only); Grossman, Grossman, and Calt 1973, 185 (first vocal chorus only); "Preachin' the Blues" 1965 (sixth vocal chorus only)

"Preachin' the Blues II" (Eddie "Son" House Jr.), 12-bar blues; based on a melody learned from James McCoy near Lyon, Mississippi; performed by House alone

a. L-411-1; j = ca. 100; 2:47
Choruses: House vocal (5)
Beginning of House's first vocal chorus

Issues: Paramount 13013, Biograph BL-12040, Document DOCD 5002, OJL-5, Rhino R2 71130, Roots RSE-5, Wolf WSE 116, Yazoo 2002


Melodic transcriptions: Basiuk 1976, 50-51 (guitar accompaniment only); Charters 1967, 64 (first vocal chorus only); Grossman, Grossman, and Calt 1973, 185 (first vocal chorus only); "Preachin' the Blues" 1965 (sixth vocal chorus only)

"M & O Blues" (Willie Brown). 12-bar blues; melody based on "Pony Blues" (Charlie Patton); performed by Brown alone

a. L-413-1; unissued, presumably lost
b. L-413-2; j = ca. 80; 3:03
Choruses: Brown vocal (5); coda
Beginning of Brown's first vocal chorus

Issues: Paramount 13009, Champion 50023, Document DOCD 5002, Frying P. 102, OJL-5, Roots RSE-5, Wolf WSE 116, Yazoo 2002


Melodic transcriptions: Grossman, Grossman, and Calt 1973, 176 (first vocal chorus only); Titon 1977a, 95 (fourth vocal chorus only; voice only); 149-150 (fourth vocal chorus only; voice and guitar)

Matrix numbers L-414 to L-417 are untraced; although Veevee and Van Rijn (1996, 72) ascribed to L-415 an unissued, presumably lost "Grandma Blues" by Willie Brown

"Future Blues" (Willie Brown). 12-bar blues; melody based on "Maggie" / "Scream'n and Hollerin' the Blues" (Charlie Patton); performed by Brown alone

a. L-418-1; unissued, presumably lost
b. L-418-2; j = ca. 112; 2:54
Choruses: introduction; Brown (6)
Beginning of Brown's first vocal chorus 

Issues: Paramount 13090, Champion 50022, Document DOCD-5002, Flyright LP 102, Milestone MLP 2016, OJI-5, Rhino R 2 71130, Roots RSE-5, Wolf WSE 116, Yazoo 2002
(Second vocal chorus only)

"On the Wall" (Louise Johnson). 12-bar blues; melody based on "Cow Cow Blues" (Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport); performed by Johnson alone

a. L-419-3; J = ca. 112; 3:02
Chorus 1: Johnson piano; vocal (2); piano; vocal (2); piano; coda
Beginning of Johnson's first vocal chorus


"By the Moon and Stars" (Louise Johnson). 12-bar blues; melody based on or same as "The Forty-Fours"/"Vicksburg Blues" (Eureal Montgomery); performed by Johnson alone

a. L-420-1; unissued, presumably lost

b. L-420-2; J = ca. 96; 2:48
Chorus: introduction; Johnson vocal (2); piano; vocal; coda
Beginning of Johnson's first vocal chorus

Lyric transcriptions: Anonymous 1990; Taft 1983, 114

Matrix numbers L-421 to L-424 are untraced

"Dry Spell Blues I" (Eddie "Son" House Jr.). 12-bar blues; performed by House alone:

a. L-425-1; unissued, presumably lost
b. L-425-2; unissued, presumably lost
c. L-425-3; unissued, presumably lost
d. L-425-4; J = ca. 112; 3:07
Chorus: House vocal (6); coda
Beginning of House's first vocal chorus

Melodic transcriptions: Basink 1976, 48-49 (guitar accompaniment only); Tilton 1977a, 121-122 (fifth vocal chorus only)
"Dry Spell Blues II" (Eddie "Son" House Jr.). 12-bar blues; performed by House alone

a. L-426-1; unissued, presumably lost
b. L-426-2; J = ca. 112; 3:10

Choruses: House vocal (6); coda

Beginning of House's first vocal chorus


Matrix numbers L-427 to L-428 are untraced

"Dry Well Blues" (Charlie Patton). 12-bar blues; melody based on "Pony Blues" (Charlie Patton). Brown joins on second guitar

a. L-429-1; unissued, presumably lost
b. L-429-2; J = ca. 96; 3:16

Choruses: Introduction (2 mm.); Patton vocal (6)

Beginning of Patton's first vocal chorus

Issues: Paramount 13070, Black Swan HCD-21/22, Document DOCD-5011, OJL-7, Pea Vine PCD-2255/6/7, Yazoo L-1020, Yazoo 2010

Komara • Blues in the Round


Melodic transcriptions: Fahey 1970, 97–98 (first three vocal choruses only); Grossman, Grossman, and Calh 1973, 204 (first vocal chorus only)

Matrix L-430 is untraced

"Some Summer Day" (Charlie Patton). 8-bar blues; melody and selected lyrics from "Sitting on Top of the World" (Armstrong "Bo" Chatmon and Walter Vinson); Brown joins on second guitar

a. L-431-1; J = ca. 96; 2:51

Choruses: Patton (4); Patton guitar; Patton vocal (2); Patton guitar; Patton vocal

Beginning of Patton's first vocal chorus

Issues: Paramount 13080, Black Swan HCD-21/22, Document DOCD-5011, Pea Vine PCD-2255/6/7, Yazoo 2001

Lyric transcriptions: Anonymous 1990; Calh and Wardlow 1988, 22 (first and last vocal choruses only); Macleod 1994, 98; O'Neal 1993

"Moon Going Down" (Charlie Patton). 12-bar blues; melody based on "Maggie"/"Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues" (Charlie Patton); Brown joins on second guitar

a. L-432-1; J = ca. 96; 3:11

Choruses: Patton vocal (6)

Beginning of Patton's first vocal chorus

As that moon she gone down by the— North Star "twas so shine etc.
"Walking Blues" (Eddie "Son" House Jr.). 12-bar blues; either Brown or Patton join House in this performance

a. 9/2 #1; \( j = \text{ca. 88; 2:54} \)

Choruses: introduction (2 mm.); House vocal (5); coda

Beginning of House's first vocal chorus

Issues: Document DL'T 532, Document DOCD-5002, Yazoo 2002
Lyric transcription: MacLeod 1994, 28-29
### Discography

#### A. Paramount label issues

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<td>13096</td>
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</table>

*Recorded by Patton with Henry Sims (violin) at Grafton, Wisconsin, in October 1929.

†Also issued on Champion 50023.

#### B. Reissues

- Disques Pierre Cardin 93518.
- Document DOCD 5011. *Charley Patton: Complete recorded works in chronological order*, vol. 3.
- Pea Vine PCD-2250. *The legendary Delta blues session*.
- Pea Vine PCD-2255/67. *Charley Patton: The complete recorded works*.

†Paramount 13111 is an issue of two Skip James recordings, "What Am I to Do Blues" (L-764-1) and "Drunkan Spee" (L-758-2). However, Veeves (1971, item number 13111) ascribed "What Am I to Do Blues" to Son House.
Riverside RLP 1052. Boogie woogie: Classic blues accompaniments.
Riverside RM 8809. Piano blues.
Roots Special Edition RSE-5. Legendary sessions Delta style: The famous 1930 Paramount recordings in chronological order. (Includes only the Louise Johnson, Son House, and Willie Brown takes.)
Yazoo L-1073. The roots of Robert Johnson.

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