

YOUR FAVORITE SONG

JOHNNY
DAMM





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#70

ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

In Essay Press’s Groundloop series, curated by Aimee Harrison and Maria Anderson, we seek to bring together authors exploring diverse subjects through loud, innovative architectures.

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<i>Series Assistants</i>	Cristiana Baik Ryan Ikeda Christopher Liek		
<i>Book Design</i>	Travis A. Sharp		

INTRODUCTION

No science is more generally interesting than that which explains the common phenomena of life. We see that salt and snow are both white, a rose red, leaves green, and the violet a deep purple; but how few persons ever ask the reason why! We know that a flute produces a musical sound and a cracked bell a discordant one—that fire is hot, ice cold, and a candle luminous—that water boils when subjected to heat, and freezes from cold; but when a child looks up into our face and asks us “why” —how many times is it silenced with a frown, or called “very foolish for asking such silly questions!” The object of the present book is to explain ... these questions (which are often more easily asked than answered) in language so simple that a child may understand it, yet not so childish to offend the scientific.*

- Q. *Why does lightning pass through the INSIDE of a man?*
A. Because the *fluids* of the human body make a better conductor than the skin; therefore, lightning passes through a man, and not down his skin.
- Q. *If animal heat is produced by COMBUSTION, why does not the human body BURN UP like a coal or candle?*
A. It actually does so. Every muscle, nerve, and organ of the body, actually *wastes away like a burning candle*; and (being reduced to air and ashes) is rejected from the system as useless.
- Q. *Why do we FEEL DEPRESSED in SPIRITS on a WET, murky DAY?*
A. The air being lighter than usual *does not balance the air in our body*.
- Q. *If fanning makes the AIR HOTTER, why can it make a PERSON feel COOLER?*
A. Because it takes the heat *out of the face*, and gives it to the air.*

- Q. *What is MUSIC?*
A.

*From Cobham Brewer, Rev. Dr. Ebenzer. *A Guide to Scientific Knowledge of Things Familiar*. 1850.

YOUR FAVORITE SONG

(BATTLE STORIES)

YOUR FAVORITE SONG

(BATTLE STORIES #7)

Think of your favorite song, then consider:
are you thinking of the song itself

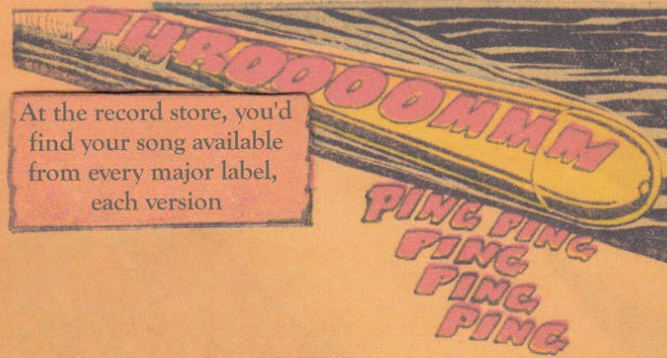


or a single performance of it?

For most of our history, you could expect to hear your favorite song played live by musicians at your local nightclub, bar, or restaurant—if not in your own home, played by a relative on the family piano.



At the record store, you'd find your song available from every major label, each version



synonymous with the rest



until the moment of tectonic shift you don't feel, when you stare down at two seven-inch records of "Tutti Frutti,"



and they're so obviously not the same

(most buy Boone's).

THE INVENTION OF DIFFERENCE

(OUR ARMY AT WAR #22)

The small money hustlers, the regional "jobbers" who deal directly with furniture stores selling records as a sideline to the phonograph sales they consider their real business: these are the men who first push for the creation of genre.

A shorthand crafted not to describe the music but to whom the music should appeal. Black. White. Rural. Urban.

So genre is created not in correspondence with style or rhythm, not in correspondence with the music itself, but as a marketing product of the (northern) (white) (male) imagination—

OUR ARMY AT WAR



OUR ARMY AT WAR

In 1921, New York's Okeh Records invents *Race Records*.

In 1925, *Hillbilly*.

In 1949, *Billboard* magazine decides to retile their *Race Records* chart. They come up with *Rhythm & Blues*.

In 1949, *Country & Western* replaces *Hillbilly Records*.



Through the '50s, it remains common for songs from the *Hillbilly*, and particularly *Race* charts, to be re-recorded by mainstream (white) (urban) artists and for these new versions to become hits on the *Pop* chart.

In 1951, Tony Bennett takes Hank Williams's "Cold, Cold Heart" to number one. The song remains 27 weeks on the *Pop* chart.

In 1955, Pat Boone takes Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame" to number one. The song remains 20 weeks on the *Pop* chart.

OUR ARMY AT WAR



OUR ARMY AT WAR



In 1962, *Country & Western* becomes simply *Country*.

In 1963, the phenomenal success of Motown has rendered the *Pop* and the *Rhythm & Blues* charts near synonymous. *Billboard* discontinues the *Rhythm & Blues* chart. (It's all *Pop* now.)

By 1965, the *Pop* charts have become inundated with the (whites playing in the style of a previous generation of) (blacks) (rural whites) British Invasion, and the Beatles have introduced the concept of the LP album as (high) (white) art.

In 1965, Billboard debuts a new chart: *Soul*.

OUR ARMY AT WAR



THE DOOR

(OUR ARMY AT WAR #22)

No one can touch the Mississippi Sheiks. You need to understand that. Long before their first recordings, they already made a good living playing parties, picnics, nightclubs—anywhere people need to dance.

And they play everything. Waltzes, foxtrots, Tin Pan Alley, jazz, blues. They even play old-time music, but only for those occasional white audiences that demand it.

And if someone requests a song they don't know, you'd better believe Lonnie Chatman, the band leader, will hurry to pick up the sheet music and teach the song to everybody before the next gig.

The definition of a good band in 1929: giving any crowd exactly what they want. No one can touch the Mississippi Sheiks.



OUR ARMY AT WAR



Before a black musician enters the recording studio, he must first cross through...

The DOOR!



In the studio as well, the Mississippi Sheiks give the crowd what they want.

Except, in this case, the crowd consists of a handful of white record executives, and what they want is the *only* thing they want from black artists: *Race Records*.

In the studio, the Sheiks play the blues.

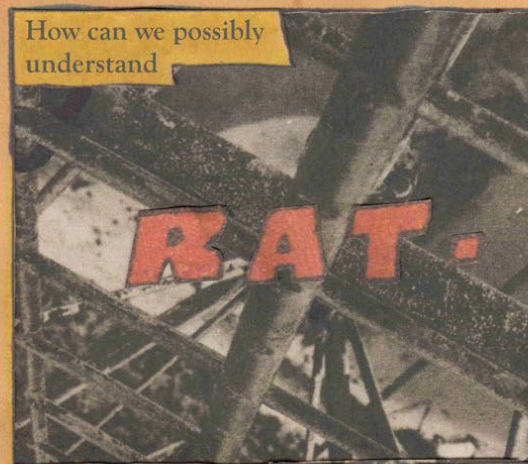
Rat-a-tat.



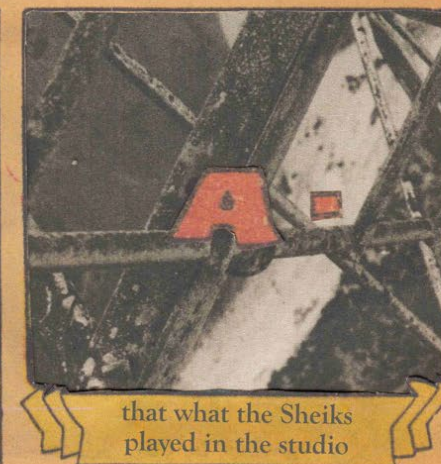
OUR ARMY AT WAR



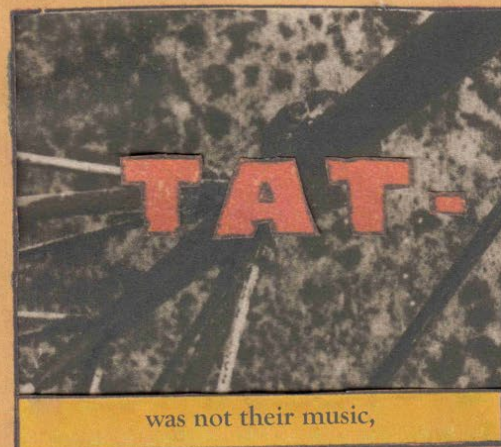
How can we possibly
understand



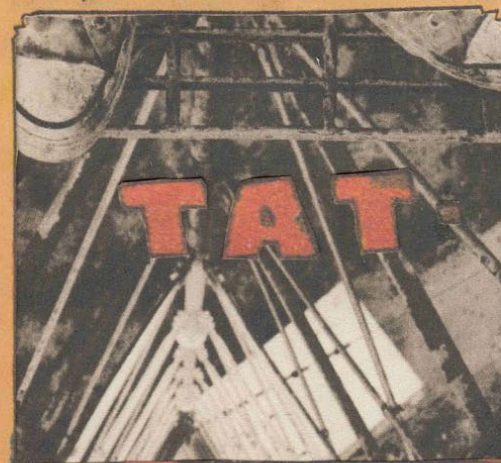
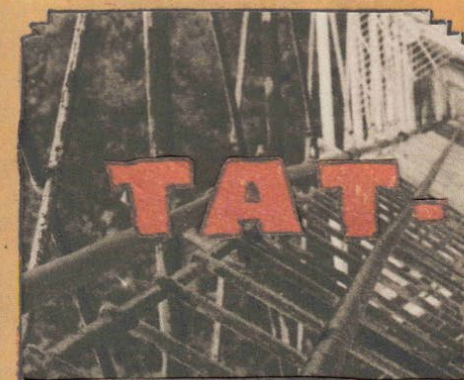
that what the Sheiks
played in the studio



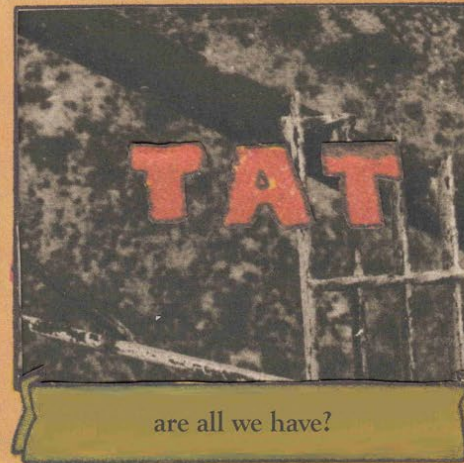
when these recordings



was not their music,



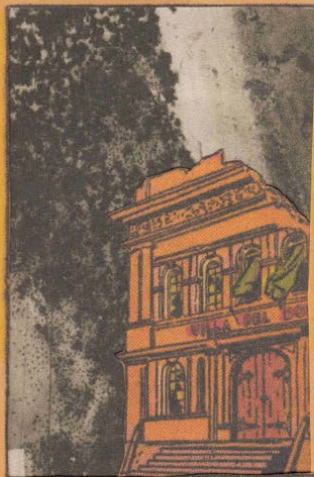
are all we have?



21



The DOOR!



Mississippi Sheiks Recordings Released in Okeh Records's Hillbilly Series, "Old Time Tunes"

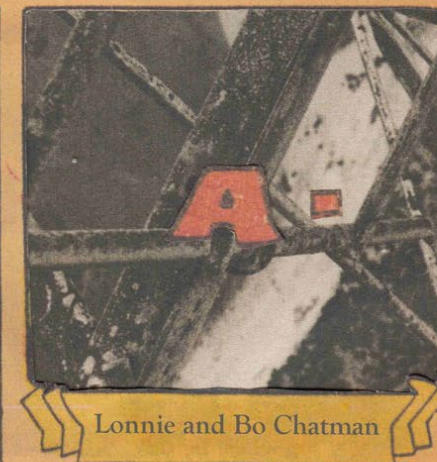
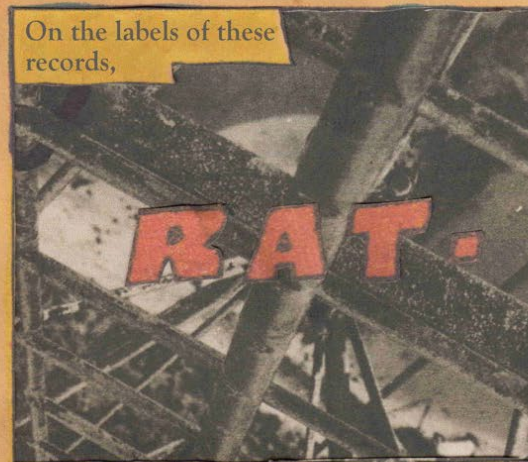
- "The Sheik Waltz" (OK 45436)
- "The Jazz Fiddler—1" (OK 45436)
- "Sheiks Special" (OK 45468)
- "Dear Little Girl" (OK 45468)
- "Mississippi Low Down" (OK 45482)
- "That's It" (OK 45482)
- "Jackson Stomp—1,4" (OK 45504)
- "Farewell Stomp—1" (OK 45532)
- "Vicksburg Stomp—2" (OK 45519)
- "Morning Glory Waltz—1" (OK 45532)
- "Sunset Waltz—4" (OK 45519)
- "Alma Waltz (Ruby Waltz)—1,3" (OK 45504)



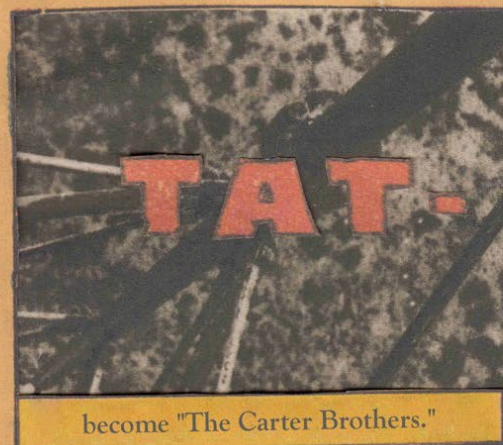
OUR ARMY AT WAR



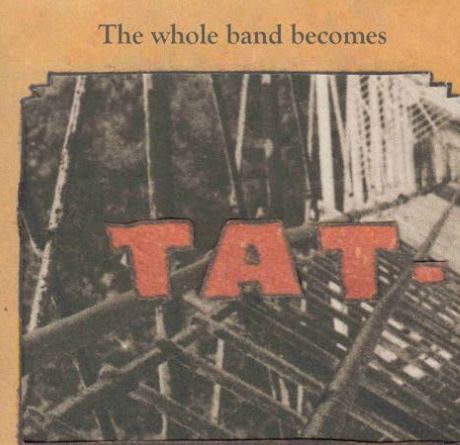
On the labels of these records,



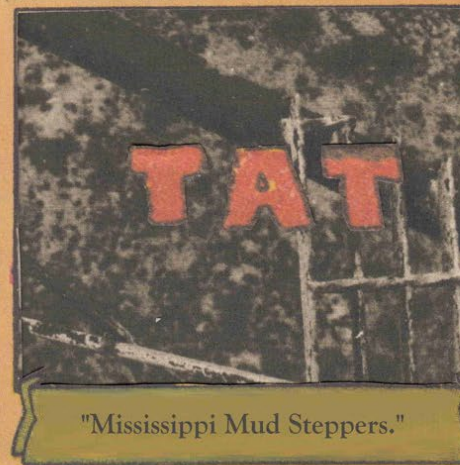
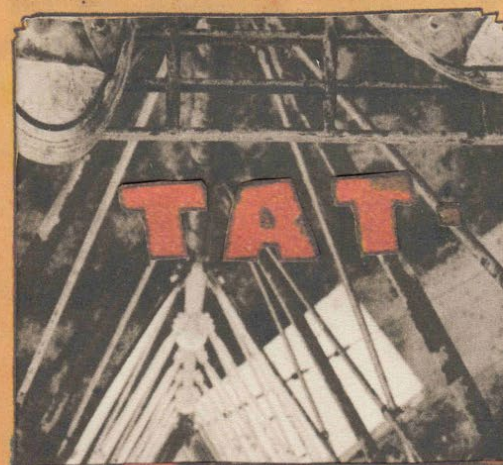
Lonnie and Bo Chatman



become "The Carter Brothers."



The whole band becomes



"Mississippi Mud Steppers."

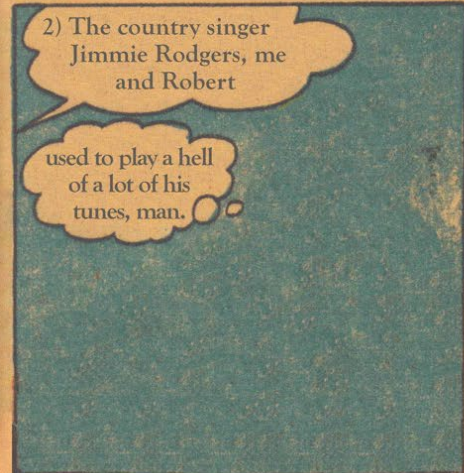
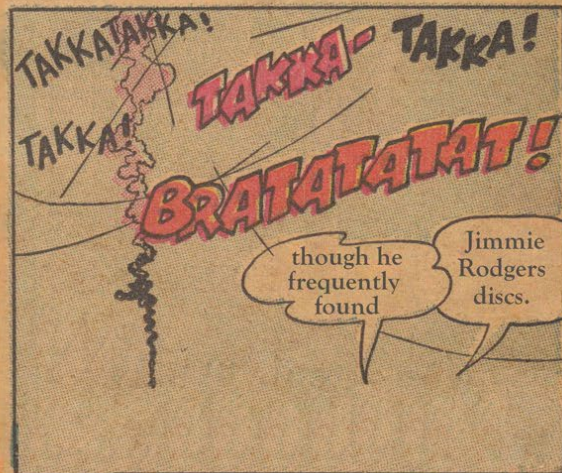
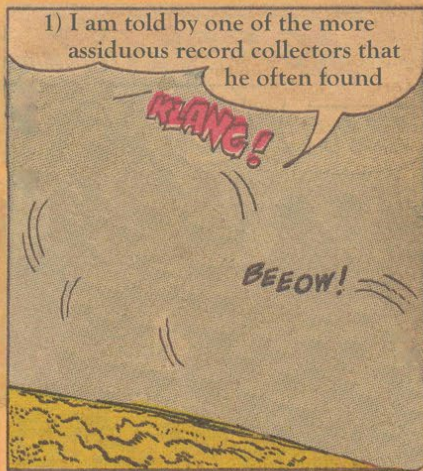
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BLUE YODEL NO. 9

(OUR ARMY AT WAR #22)
(BATTLE STORIES #7)

tat



1) Elijah Wald, music historian

2) Johnny Shines, musician and traveling companion of

a man who they say sells his soul to the devil in exchange for his talent,

who records 29 Race tracks to little sales and near total obscurity before dying of syphilis, pneumonia, or poison at the age of 27,

who is only discovered in the '60s by (white) (foreign) blues revivalists,

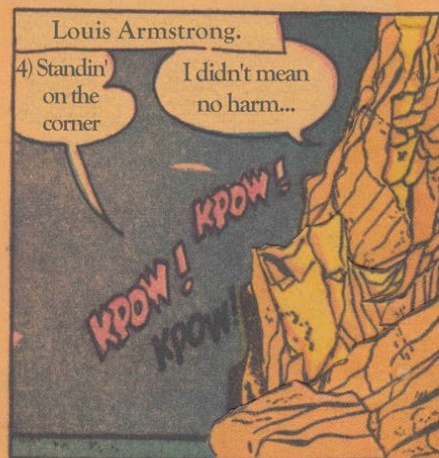
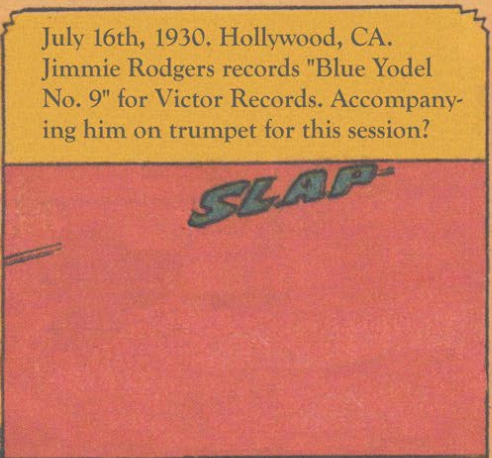
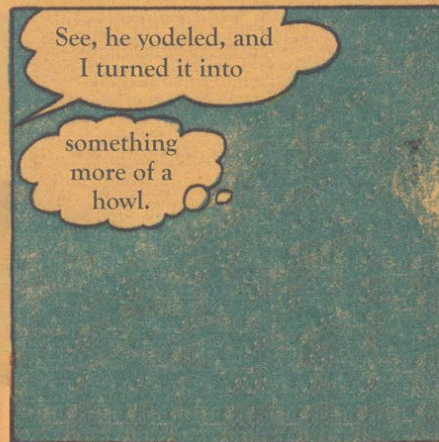
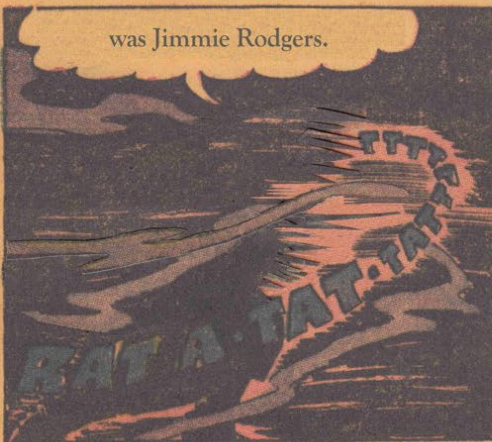
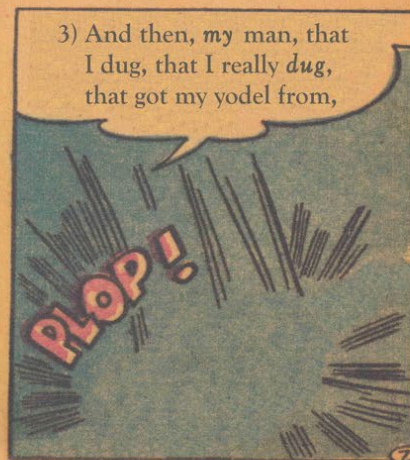
who, according to Shines, plays "anything" he hears "on the radio... Ragtime, pop tunes, waltz numbers, polkas,"

"The King of Delta Blues,"

Robert Johnson



OUR ARMY AT WAR



3) And then, *my* man, that
I dug, that I really *dug*,
that got my yodel from,

3) Chester Burnett

aka Howlin' Wolf

4) The opening lines to "Blue Yodel No. 9"
sung by

a man who they say learns everything he knows about music
traveling the country as a railroad brakeman,

who records 12-bar blues, Tin Pan Alley, cowboy songs, and slick
blends of jazz, Hawaiian, and pop,

all released by Victor Records's Hillbilly series, "Old Familiar Tunes
and Novelties,"

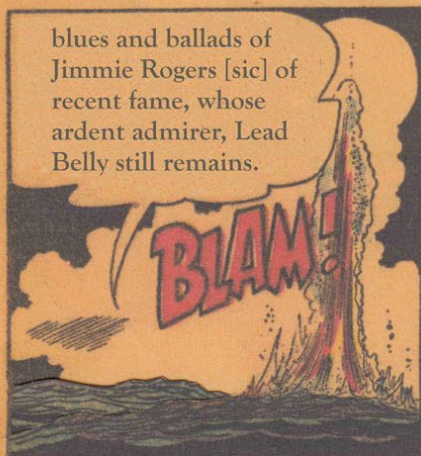
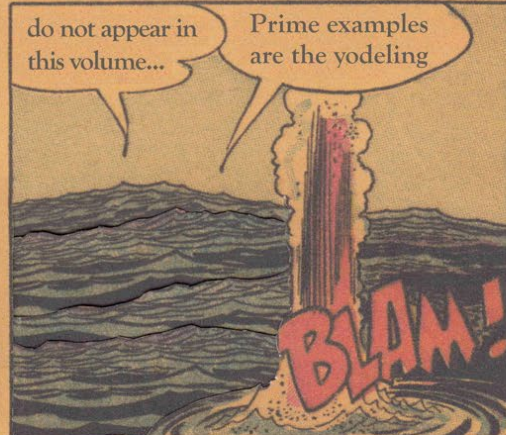
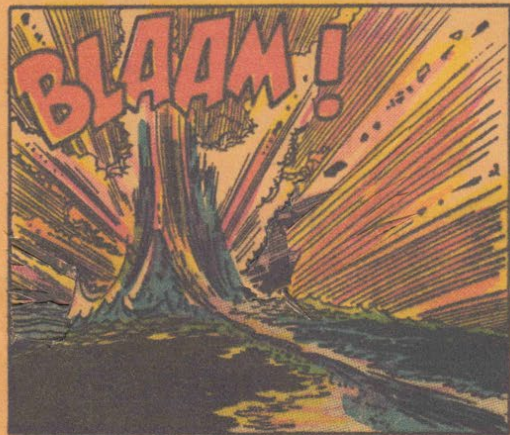
Hillbilly, unlike *Race*, less a restriction of sound than a winking
fiction that even the most modern music, when played by a white
man with a southern accent and unearthly yodel, becomes "Old,"

who brings in a trumpeter for the recording of "Blue Yodel No. 9,"
"The Father of Country Music,"

Jimmie Rodgers



OUR ARMY AT WAR



5) A man who meets convict Huddie Ledbetter while "collecting" songs at Angola State Prison,

who, when "collecting" songs, also has a habit of copywriting them,

who hires Lead Belly, once freed, as driver, assistant, and then main attraction,

who not only records Lead Belly but books and manages his live appearances,

in both cases forbidding the playing of Rodgers's "Silver Haired Daddy" or any other song he labels (commercial) (white) inauthentic,

who, along with the other folklorists, codifies authenticity and finishes what the record execs started,

"The Ballad Hunter,"

John Lomax

OUR ARMY AT WAR



NOTES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Your Favorite Song (Battle Stories) is particularly indebted to the scholarship of Elijah Wald and Karl Hagstrom Miller. "Your Favorite Song (Battle Stories # 7)" and "The Invention of Difference (Our Army at War # 22)" rely heavily on the vision of music history depicted in Wald's *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'N' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music*. The characterization of Hillbilly recordings and the Lomax folkloric paradigm derive from Miller's *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*.

p. 24:

Huber, Patrick. "Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians On Old Time Records, 1924-1932." *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, edited by Diane Pecknold. Duke University Press, 2013, pp 80. The description of the Sheiks' live repertoire also derives from Huber.

p. 30-31:

1) Wald, Elijah. *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*. Amistad, 2004, pp. 80.

2) qtd. in Wald, pp. 118.

p. 32-33:

3) qtd. in Mazor, Barry. *Meeting Jimmie Rodgers: How America's Original Roots Music Hero Changed the Pop Sounds of a Century*. Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 48.

p. 34-35:

5) From the unpublished notes for Lomax's *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936). qtd. in Miller, Karl Hagstrom. *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 245.

"Your Favorite Song (Battle Stories # 7)" previously appeared in *No Tokens*.

AUTHOR BIO



Johnny Damm is the author of *Science of Things Familiar* (The Operating System, forthcoming) and two chapbooks, *The Domestic World: A Practical Guide* (Little Red Leaves, forthcoming) and *The Old Man's Illustrated Library: Issues # 36 & # 5* (No Press). You can see more of his work [here](#).



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