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MULESKINNER
JACK ELLIOTT



TOPIC

Jack Elliott

MULESKINNER

San Francisco Bay Blues
Ol' Riley
Boll Weevil
Bed Bug Blues
New York Town
Old Blue
Grey Goose
Muleskinners' Blues
East Texas Talking Blues
Cocaine
Dink's Song
Black Baby
Salty Dog

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Recorded by Bill Leader and Dick Swettenham

Rambling Jack Elliott who sings these American folk songs was born in New York, son of a Brooklyn doctor. He began to get restless at the age of nine, ran off to join a Wild West rodeo at fourteen and by the time he was twenty was wandering over the United States with Woody Guthrie. Writing about Jack Elliott in the sleeve notes of his album 'Talking Woody Guthrie' 12T93, Paul Nelson and Jon Pankake say 'He heard a Guthrie phonograph record and the profound effect it made on him was to change his whole life. Soon after that he met Woody. They lived together for one year and, packing only guitars and razors, rambled around the country, on and off, for the next five years ...' When Woody was unable to travel any more and had to be hospitalized, Jack busked across the United States alone, then went to England. In 1956 skiffle was going strong in London and Jack began to sing in pubs and create something of a name for himself. In 1957 he sent for his buddy Derroll Adams, banjo-picker from Portland, Oregon and together the two sang and made a Topic album billed as the Rambling Boys. This record is a release of material on JACK TAKES THE FLOOR, Topic 10T15, with additional songs.

Other songs by Jack Elliott on the Topic label are in the album ROLL ON BUDDY (with Derroll Adams), Topic 12T105, a reissue of material on RAMBLING BOYS, Topic 10T14, with additional material, and in

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TALKING WOODY GUTHRIE, Topic 12T93 an album of Jack Elliott's finest performances of Woody's songs.

The Songs

SAN FRANCISCO BAY BLUES: A blues by Jesse Fuller of Oakland in California. Fuller, a Negro busker, visited England in 1959 and gave several recitals of his 'one man band' music, playing the twelve string guitar with mouth-organ and kazoo harnessed round his neck, a set of cymbals on a stand and a 'fotdella' or 'footdoola' – a foot operated six-stringed 'piano' that Fuller claims to have invented. *San Francisco*, a song specially made for this not-over-tractable instrumental combination, is a mixture of traditional blues with popular music, and in that respect is characteristic of its composer.

OL' RILEY: One of Leadbelly's songs. Riley was a celebrated 'escape artist' who could outrun and outwit all the prison bloodhounds in East Texas. His adventures form one of the great epic songs of Southern Negro convicts, and on Leadbelly's evidence, when the work-gangs began to sing about Ol' Riley, the prison guards would loosen their pistols in their holsters and shade their eyes from the sun. Leadbelly knew this song in two forms – in the form in which he sang it as a convict and the form in which he sang it as a nightclub entertainer. This present

version shows the latter form. For the true convict form see *Negro Folk Songs as sung by Lead Belly* (Macmillan Co.).

BOLL WEEVIL: Another Leadbelly version. The boll weevil is a cotton pest that lays its egg in the young buds and destroys the cotton. It was introduced into Texas from Mexico in the 1890s and spread rapidly, causing millions of dollars worth of damage annually. The Negro ballads and tales of the boll weevil show a curious ambivalence of feeling, with horror at the depredation and respect for the little creature's persistence. Carl Sandburg remarks on the whimsical point of this ballad, that 'while the boll weevil can make its home anywhere, the Negro, son of man, hath not where to lay his head.' Every singer of this ballad has his own version. The total number of stanzas runs into some hundreds.

BED BUG BLUES: A blues that seems to have spread mainly by means of the cheap vaudeville circuits. It is an early twentieth century product of the drift of Southern Negroes into the slums of the big cities. Most people who know this song probably learnt it from the well-known Bessie Smith version, issued on records in the mid-1930s.

NEW YORK TOWN: One of Woody Guthrie's most characteristic songs. An individual form of the blues.

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But not the dreary cheatin-momma-bottle-of-gin blues. Guthrie says of the blues: “They say the right thing in a way that most preachers ought to pattern after. All them honky-tonky dance hall blues had parents and those parents was the blues that come from the workers in the factories, mills, mines, crops, orchards and oilfields, and big city streets. But by the time a blues reaches a honky-tonk music box, it’s changed from concrete to kisses, from a cold cell to a warm bed with a hot momma, from sunstroke on the job to a brand new baby and a bottle of gin”. This is a down-and-out-in-the-city blues refreshingly free from self-pity and the mooch. It is one among more than a thousand songs that should be credited as Guthrie’s creations.

OLD BLUE: Songs and stories about hunting dogs are widely current in the Southern States, understandably in an area where they form a means of livelihood. Attributes of the hound were often exaggerated as were the circumstances of its death and burial. Old Blue is a widely sung song of this type, starting life probably as a sentimental item for a Nigger Minstrel Show towards the end of the last century.

GREY GOOSE: The breath of the old African epic style blows through this ballad, that seems to be a rare survival from slavery times, that has lingered on,

mainly as a prison work song. The most effective way to sing it is leader-chorus fashion, with the solo singer handling the story lines while the gang chime in with the ‘Lord, Lord, Lord’ refrain. Ballads of monstrous indestructible animals and birds belong among the earliest stratum of folk literature (cf. the ancient English song of *The Cutty Wren*). Leadbelly learned this version in the Central State Prison Farm in Texas. (Texas prisons seem to be the last home of this heroic song).

MULESKINNER’S BLUES: In parts of the rural south, the mule is still the main means of traction, drawing not only the buggy and the plough but also the levellers and rollers used in making roads. The present song was originally evolved by Negro road labourers joining the idiom of the blues to that of the work-song. A Southern stage entertainer, Bill Monroe, recorded a made-over version in the 1920s. This was imitated by the popular hillbilly singer Jimmie Rodgers, who recorded it as *Blue Yodel No. 9*. Cisco Houston learned it from the Rodgers record and recorded it for Folkways. And Jack Elliott learned it from Cisco Houston in the ‘process of oral diffusion’.

EAST TEXAS TALKING BLUES: Moulded in the traditional talking blues pattern, this is one of the many similar songs which Jack Elliott learned during his travels. Only certain verses are standard and the

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others vary from singer to singer.

COCAINE: The Reverend Gary Davis, from whom Jack Elliott learned this song, is an ordained minister whose livelihood comes mostly from singing hymns on the streets of Harlem. He was born in 1896 in South Carolina, the son of a poor farmer. He says he was a good guitar player by the time he was seven, and early gained a local reputation as a star singer of blues and “wordly songs”. In his young manhood he became blind, and probably as a result he took to religion. Nowadays he rarely sings anything else but sacred songs, but occasionally he will unpack one of his old ‘sinful’ songs, at the insistence of young New York folkniks. The present song is a representative of the native American tradition of dope songs that grew up about the end of the nineteenth century and produced songs with great appeal to white college students, such as *Willie the Weeper*, *Cocaine Lil*, and *Take a Whiff on Me*. The melody seems to have evolved some sixty years ago, probably being made up on the guitar. Variants of the tune, with more or less identical accompaniment-figures, have carried countless texts, including *Stackolee* and *Freight Train*.

DINK’S SONG: John and Alan Lomax recorded this song from a Negro woman from Yazoo City, Mississippi. They found her on the banks of the Brazos River, washing her man’s clothes. She was one

of a number of women who had been shipped out “along with the mules and the iron scrapers” to a levee-building outfit. The women were there to keep the levee-building labourers from straying off the job. The song was first published in 1934, in the Lomaxes’ *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. Since then it has become widely popular among city audiences. It has even invaded the concert platform. Not that Miss Dink ever got much out of it.

BLACK BABY: The same melody may do all kinds of jobs. The tune of this one is occasionally used as a lullaby, but its shape indicates that it began life as a field holler. Field hollers are melodic cries, sometimes wordless, sometimes with improvised scraps of text, used as signals, or merely hollered to relieve the monotony of loneliness. The hollers are the melodic germs from which many Negro folk songs have evolved. *Black Baby* shows a stage of development about halfway between holler and proper song.

SALTY DOG: An old ten-bar blues in the form of a repeated eight-bar theme which was a speciality of Papa Charlie Jackson. This banjo player and singer who recorded frequently for the Paramount label in the mid-twenties was a popular entertainer

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accredited with being one of Big Bill Broonzy's early influences – in fact Bill said that he took lessons from Papa Charlie Jackson when he, Bill, first arrived in Chicago. Salty Dog was an extremely popular number both in the folk and jazz repertoire of such bands as those of Buddy Bolden and Joe 'King' Oliver. Kid Ory played it frequently.

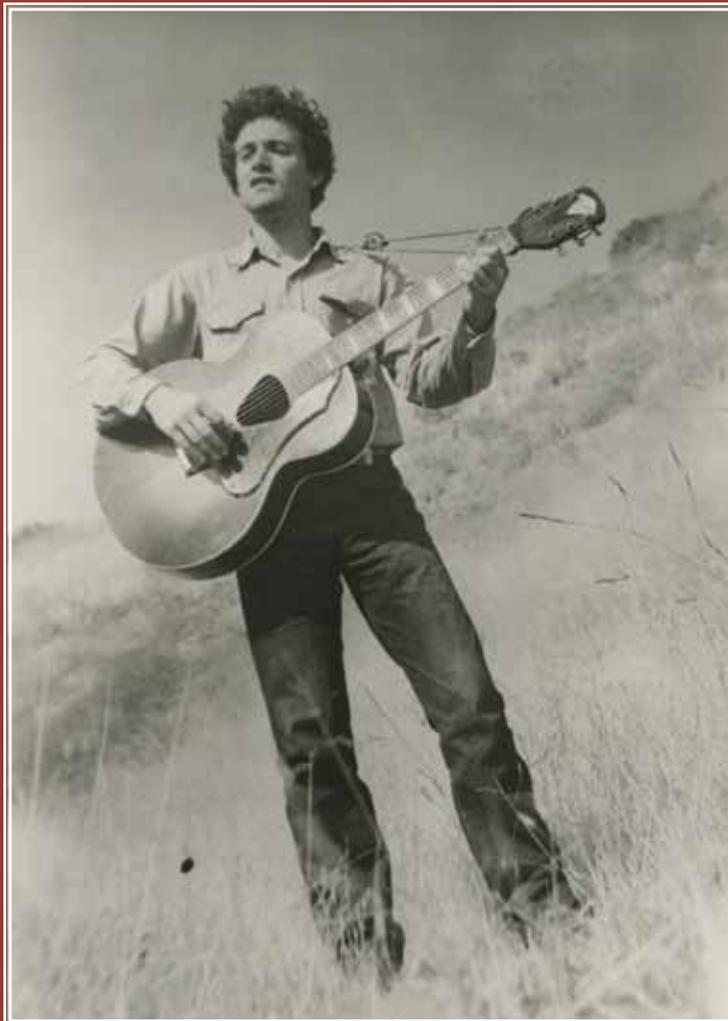
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