Move on down the line

Jesse Fuller *singing and playing his 12 string guitar, kazoo and fotdella.*

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First issued by Topic in 1960
Sleeve Notes by Joe Boyd, 1965

Most of the printed words published in various folk music or jazz magazines or on record jackets about Jesse Fuller have emphasised the utter uniqueness and individuality of Mr. 'Lone Cat' Fuller's One-Man-Band. And with good reason, for Jesse Fuller as a man, as a singer and as a musician is a classic independent spirit - he built his fotdella (foot-operated bass) and complicated mouth rig (harmonica, kazoo and microphone) because he didn't want to have to depend on any sidemen. But this record is just as important and interesting as a document of a generally neglected historical aspect of American Negro music as it is a tribute to the peculiar talents of a remarkable man from California.

Just as there was once an over-simplified theory on the development of jazz (Buddy Bolden to Bunk Johnson to King Oliver to Louis Armstrong up the river to Chicago) there seems to be current an over-simplified theory on the development of Rural Blues (Charlie Patton to Son House to Robert Johnson to Muddy Waters up the river to Chicago). Both theories have in common an exaggerated reverence for the waters and banks of the Mississippi River. But the 'Giants of Delta Blues' (House, Johnson, Estes etc.) as great as they are, and as influential as they have been on sub-sequent generations of blues singers, are by no means typical of what the Negro Folk Music of the Southern United States was, or for that matter, is now.

Long before the advent of the phonograph, the vaudeville and patent medicine tent shows brought hit tunes to the small towns of Tennessee and Georgia and Carolina. Many of these songs were rags, but many were what would now be called blues even though the term was unknown in many parts of the south before 1914. The working men as well as the professional entertainers carried songs all over the south, from lumber camps, to railroad gangs, to prisons. The popularity of the famous 'Dr. Watts' hymnal meant that many of the same songs were being sung in Negro churches from Texas to Virginia. And of course, the itinerant street singers, the blind men and beggars who wandered all over the south carried the popular ditties and rags and dances from one locale to another.

Reverend Gary Davis recalls as a boy, in 1903, hearing *Candy Man* sung in a tent show revue that passed through South Carolina. For over a year afterwards, all the travelling singers that he heard were singing *Candy Man*. It was a sensational hit.

To hear what most Negroes in the early part of this century considered 'their music', one must listen to the recordings of Leadbelly and Jelly Roll Morton - or Jesse Fuller.

Jesse Fuller left the south at the age of 26. But in the relatively short time he travelled and worked and sang in Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee, he came into contact with almost every conceivable type of Negro music. He played for country suppers, for Saturday night dances in barrel houses, in tent shows, and for passers-by on the streets. He worked in railroad gangs, in levee camps and road crews. He listened to the Revivalist preachers at camp meet- ings in Georgia and to the bawdy-house piano players in Memphis.

Some of the musicians who were part of this world are still alive and playing: Gus Cannon and Will Shade in Memphis, Sweet Emma Barrett and Billie Pierce in New Orleans, Peg Leg Howell in Atlanta and hundreds more that the scholars have not yet discovered.

Perhaps Jesse's early decision to leave the South has helped preserve his music as well as his health and security. He has lived in Oakland, California, with his family and small plot of ground for almost 30 years. He never stopped playing, but was never anxious to go back on the road again.

His later career started slowly. During the early l950s his fans were limited to those devoted few who like folk singers Rolf Cahn and Jack Elliott visited his home in Oakland; and an occasional trad fan who might hear him at a Dixieland Club in San Francisco. But the number of concerts, festival and club appearances have increased each year, and finally in 1965 on the day before his trip to Britain, Jesse Fuller fulfilled his ambition to appear on a nationwide network television show. Without advance warning, the Les Crane Show suddenly became Jesse Fuller complete with fotdella, kazoo and broad smile, singing San Francisco Bay Blues. It was a memorable moment, for Jesse's career has long been overshadowed by the fame of that remarkable composition of his.

Fame and recognition have been accorded to so many Negro folk artists long after they had either died or lost the ability to communicate their art. Happily, with his voice and energy seemingly undiminished, this is not true of Jesse Fuller.

MOVE ON DOWN THE LINE is a new composition of Jesse's which may some day rank with *San Francisco Bay Blues* as a Fuller classic. The bass line and rhythm he knocks out with his thumb and big toe are worthy of the solidest beat group rhythm section. The lyrics of this and all Jesse Fuller songs are in the Negro vaudeville tradition; perhaps a bit less profound and introspective than a classic rural blues but full of wit and perception.

STEALING is a song immortalised by Will Shade and the Memphis Jug Band, but no doubt has earlier origins in the tent shows of the ragtime era. The oft-found line 'put your arm around me like the circle round the sun' could easily be either the product of a ragtime songwriter's imagination or a timeless snippet of folk imagery.

NINETY-NINE YEARS AND ONE DARK DAY seems to be another Fuller original, inspired by his brief stay on a Georgia chain gang. Many of Georgia's roads have been built by lifers - convicts sentenced to 99 years' hard labour.

Jesse loves to sing for children (he has three daughters himself) as his raucously enthusiastic rendition of **ANIMAL FAIR** shows. Most listeners will recognise at least a few of the children's rhymes and game songs which have been incorporated into this charming song.

An almost never-ending fount of material for Negro vaudeville singers was the shattered affair. Men seemed to take it in much better humour than women, and the songs of Papa Charlie Jackson, Bert Williams, Spencer Williams, as well as Jesse Fuller are full of humorous 'lock-outs`, as in **SLEEPING IN THE MIDNIGHT COLD**. The female singers like Ma Rainey, Sarah Martin, Bessie Smith took break-ups much harder, as the tragic blues *Misery Blues, Death Sting Me Blues* and *Send me to the 'Lectric Chair* will attest.

Of all the hero or villain legends in American folk music, **STACKOLEE** 'that bad man' appears in both white and Negro ballads, often with references to the supernatural powers of his 'Five Dollar Stetson Hat'. There was a notorious family named Lee in Memphis during the late nineteenth century, and a longshoreman (stevedore) was often known as a stacker. The song was part of Ma Rainey`s repertoire long before she recorded it in 1925. There are several recorded melodies for the song, of which I think Jesse's is the most interesting.

The following five titles were recorded over a decade ago by the World Song label, and first released in Britain by Topic in 1960. That it is almost impossible to distinguish between these tracks and the first five, recorded on 19th March 1965, is a testimony to the indestructibility of the remarkable Mr. Fuller.

RAILROAD WORKSONG is a remarkable amalgam of verses from railroad songs: *Take This Hammer, Midnight Special, John Henry* and others. The most notable aspect of this track then, is not the song, since it has no real identity other than as an anthology of railroad-gang blues verses, but rather Jesse's singing. This is as powerful a sample of country blues singing as anything recorded in the past ten years.

LINING UP THE TRACK is a brief but choice example of a good-humoured railroad song.

Every blues singer seems to have in his repertoire a number of nameless collections of blues lines which are easily altered to fit his particular mood. Almost every verse of **HANGING 'ROUND A SKIN GAME** and **RAILROAD BLUES** can be traced to other singers and other blues, but his intricate guitar work and novel melodies make them both outstanding examples of Seaboard blues singing - that is, in the tradition of other Carolina and Georgia singers, Willie McTell, Blind Boy Fuller, Peg Leg Howell. Note also the use of 'high sheriff', a term which does not exist in American law-enforcement nomenclature, and must therefore, be a carry-over from the British ballads that emigrated. A 'skin game' is a kind of poker.

Jesse Fuller didn't realise that a television show wasn't really necessary to let audiences know that the great folk-revival anthem **SAN FRANCISCO BAY BLUES** was his original composition. Certainly in Britain, where it was first made popular around the folk clubs by Jack Elliott ten years ago, and a little later recorded by both Jack and Jesse on Topic, the song has always been associated with the Lone Cat One Man Band.

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down the line

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