No Red, No White, Just Blues

Alan Lomax and the Fisk Ethnographer’s 1941 Trip to the Mississippi Delta

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Submitted to Professor Andrew Friedman
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of
History 400: Senior Thesis Seminar

22 April 2011
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ABSTRACT:

In the summer of 1941, Alan Lomax and a team of ethnographers from Fisk University travelled to Clarksdale, Mississippi as a part of a joint project between the Library of Congress and Fisk University. The purpose of the trip was to record and document the folk music of the Delta for the Library’s archives. For Lomax, Assistant Curator of Folk Song at the Library, the trip represented an irresistible chance to record one of his favorite genres of folk, Delta blues, a music of the region’s black working class.

Originating in the Delta at the end of the 19th century, by the 1940s the Delta blues had come to personify the region. Its gritty tones coupled with satirical lyrics took on issues of class and race within a region known for its intense racial oppression. While Lomax believed the Delta to be a one of America’s greatest folk cultures, the project reflected a very different picture of the region. Demonstrated by the findings of Lomax and his colleagues from Fisk, the 1940s Delta was region undergoing serious socio-political reforms. With the nation mobilizing for war and the Delta experiencing its own regional changes, the 1940s was a moment of transition and transformation with both the Delta and the nation.

Through the three varying perspectives of Alan Lomax, the Fisk ethnographers, and the Delta bluesmen I argue that this project’s history is essential to understanding the relationships between southern working class blacks and issues of labor, race, and nationalism. As a white popular front leftist from the nation’s capital, Alan Lomax conceived the trip as a chance to collect a music he believed essential to voicing the plight of America’s working classes. At the same time, his Fisk colleagues John W. Work, Lewis W. Jones, and Samuel C. Adams Jr. of the southern black middle class, saw the trip as a means of studying and canonizing working class black music into the American mainstream. Finally, the bluesmen represented the voices of the
the Delta through their music. The combination of these three differing histories on the same story demonstrates the fragmentation within the black community in a period where blacks began to mobilize throughout the nation towards a unified black community and eventually a common front of the civil rights movement.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I want to thank Professor Richard Freedman for showing me that it is possible to mix fun with serious academic study and for giving me the initial ideas for this project. To Professor Andrew Friedman, thank you for helping me take a single sentence and stretch it into something in which I can take great pride. I must also thank Professor Saler for adding the polishing touches to this project. I am equally in great debt to Todd Harvey of the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress for guiding my research even when we both had no idea where it was going. I also cannot go without acknowledging the help of my family. Finally I would like to thank my friends for putting up with me through this whole process.
INTRODUCTION

I've Never Been Satisfied

On Sunday, August 31, 1941, a single car drove down a dusty back road on Stovall Plantation just outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi. In the car were two men, Alan Lomax and John W. Work; and in the trunk of the car was a guitar and Presto Model Y disc recorder, along with a box of unrecorded 78-rpm vinyl and glass discs. The car pulled up in front of a small wooden house, where a black sharecropper who called himself Muddy Waters greeted Lomax and Work. Over some whiskey, Lomax and Work explained to Waters that they were in the region as a part of an anthropologic study collecting music; the study was a joint project sponsored by the Library of Congress and Fisk University. The two ethnographers had arrived on Waters' porch based on tips from the townspeople of Clarksdale that Waters was a skilled musician. Having caught wind of Lomax and Work's presence on the plantation, Son Simms, Waters' friend and fellow musician, joined the group on the porch. After a little discussion between the four men, Lomax returned to the car and retrieved the recording equipment, while Waters and Simms retrieved their instruments. With Simms playing accompanying violin and Waters playing the lead on guitar and vocals, the Stovall Plantation tenants would lay-down three tracks for Lomax and Work. In one track titled “I Bes Troubled,” Waters sang:

Well if I feel tomorrow
Like I feel today
I'm gonna pack my suitcase
And make my getaway

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Lord I'm troubled, I'm all worried in mind
And I've never been satisfied,
And I just can't keep from crying

The feeling Waters alluded to within his music was the result of extreme socio-political pressures the black community faced within the Delta. Stovall Plantation like hundreds of others was a creation of New South politics which renovated the agrarian economy of the Old South. These new plantations instituted a combination of cheap local labor and mechanized farming to revitalize the region’s agricultural output. Many blacks would escape this modernized form of economic oppression through the Great Migration, immigrating north. However, much of the region’s black population remained trapped within the Delta, consistently exposed to the fear and frustration embedded within Waters’ song. Waters’ music was part of genre specific to the region, known as Delta blues.

Over the next year, Lomax and a series of ethnographers from Fisk University would scour over Clarksdale and the surrounding region recording music and conducting interviews similar to the one with Waters and Simms. They would record sacred music like gospel, hymns, and preachers’ sermons as well as secular music like work songs, children’s songs, and more blues like Waters’. The goal of the project was to record the region’s songs for an academic study of its musical history as well as that music’s relation to the “dynamics of social change” within the Delta. But by 1943, the project prematurely ended when Lomax and his colleagues at Fisk parted ways due to internal discrepancies and the introduction of America into WWII. Without publishing any of the findings on the Delta’s musical history or its contemporary culture, the project ended unsatisfied.

4 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770.
6 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 9).
Traditionally, historians have treated this moment as a part of musical history, mentioning it within the larger history of the blues. Musicologists like David Evans and Jeff Todd Titon reference the project, but only treat it as a small part of the histories of Alan Lomax and Muddy Waters. In recent years, several books have been produced specifically on the Fisk trip into the Delta; still, none offer a comprehensive analysis of the trip. Alan Lomax himself was the first to revive interest in the trip through his memoirs *The Land Where the Blues Began*, released in 1993. In addition to Lomax’s memoirs, historians Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov released *Lost Delta Found*, a collection of unpublished works written by three of the Fisk ethnographers that accompanied Lomax: Lewis W. Jones, John W. Work, and Samuel C. Adams, Jr. But even with the addition of these new sources, there is no comprehensive history of the project itself or its relation to the history of the early 1940s.

The trip took place in the transitory years between the Great Depression and America’s entrance into World War II, snapshotting a pivotal moment in history. In 1941, the Mississippi Delta was the home to densest black population in America.\(^7\) Despite the massive amounts of emigration out of the region beginning in the late 1910s, the region was still home to over 362,000 black people who made up over 72 percent of the total population of the Delta.\(^8\)

Consistent with the politics of the South, these blacks witnessed and felt extreme forms of racial segregation and violence. But what was unique to the Delta was its reaction to that racial oppression through music, a medium the people used to express their own social autonomy. Regarding the Delta blues, African-American Studies professor Clyde Woods writes, “Born in a new era of censorship, suppression, and persecution, the blues conveyed the sorrow of the

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\(^7\) Gordon 37.
\(^8\) *Lost Delta Found* 229.
individual and collective tragedy that had befallen African Americans." Woods' statement highlights a classic understanding of blues, music reflective of the racial oppressions of the South. While this is certainly true, it oversimplifies the blues. Blues was not merely a musical crooning of black "sorrow." It gave this working class community a political voice within the South. Throughout this project it is important to understand that the blues was an active form of social commentary within the Delta, not a passive lamentation. Similarly, the region and culture that spawned blues music was itself new, embodied in the socio-economic politics of the New South. Within the second verse of "I Bes Troubled" Waters sang:

Yeah, I know my little ol' baby  
She gonna jump and shout  
That ol' train be late girl,  
And I come walkin' out

Through his allusions to the "ol' train," Waters highlighted the mobility of the working class during the 40s, both literally and socially. Through new technologies like trains and automobiles, the Delta's working class could move about the region unlike previous generations, enlarging the sense of community and giving the people a new personal freedom. Juke joints—local clubs within the Delta—provided spaces for working class peoples to mix and mingle free of the political stresses within the region. This new urbanizing social scene relieved the pressures of the rural, agrarian labor through a new concept of a united community.

This working class movement is an extension of what social theorist Michael Denning coined "The Cultural Front." According to Denning, the social movement of the 1930s commonly referred to as the Popular Front should be reimaged as a movement toward progression inspired by the working class itself, not the socialist elites who attempted to speak on

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their behalf. Understanding the Delta as a part of a working class community reimagines the blues’ counterculture as part of a larger movement within America to vocalize previously suppressed demands of the people.

As this Cultural Front shifted into the 40s, it was further complicated by the introduction of WWII and issues of nationalism. Well before the Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government took steps toward mobilizing the American people. After FDR pledged American support for the Allied powers through diplomatic acts like the Lend-Lease Act and the Atlantic Charter of 1941, the U.S. government intimated its intentions to support the Allied powers. As propaganda began to circulate the nation demanding the support of the U.S. citizens, black communities throughout America saw the impending war as a moment for social change on the home front.

In his study of black America and its creation Nikhil Singh writes, “During the war, black activists drew strong links between fascism, colonialism, and U.S. racial segregation that could not be wished away.” Activists like A. Philip Randolph who had began to speak out for black rights in the 30s, saw the war as a moment to push for black equality. Using his organization known as the March on Washington Movement (MoWM) he demanded uniform racial reforms and finally actually organizing a march on the capital in 1941. Other movements of the time like the Double V called for victory for America and victory for blacks against racism. But this connection did not just apply to black activists; it existed on a collective basis exemplified by the Fisk study.

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The Fisk University/Library of Congress Coahoma County project is a concrete example of how a region of black America negotiated with local politics, ultimately rejecting them and forcing their own counter culture into greater America as a means of cultural change. This study focuses on the project itself as an example of the specific issues of race, class, and national citizenship facing rural southern blacks. Through the comparison of the three different perspectives within the Fisk project, I will create a comprehensive history of the Delta's working class blacks in the early 1940s. As a white popular front folklorist from the nation's capital, Alan Lomax conceived the trip as essential to voicing the plight of America's working class folk people. Meanwhile his colleagues from the Fisk University in Nashville believed the trip to be a study that would support the canonization of Delta music as a part of the larger American culture, thereby assimilating rural working class blacks into mainstream America and assisting in black progression. Finally, the bluesmen represented the voice of the people within the Delta as the region changed under the internal and external socio-political pressures. By repeating the story of the Fisk project through three different perspectives, each rendition will build upon the last in order to create a multidimensional understanding of the study in relation to the history of 1941.

Through its multiplicity of perspectives, the story of demonstrates that the 1940s Delta was not an isolated frontier of America, but a vibrant and savvy place as much a part of the American superculture as any other region. WWII represented the moment of transition when blues culture could no longer be confined to the Delta and escaped via its performers to greater America. It was within this moment of the early 1940s that the blues "made its getaway" from a folk phenomenon into a part of the national identity.
Known as the first genre of blues, musicologists and aficionados have placed great significance upon Delta blues, crediting it as the origins of jazz and a variety of other blues genres including rock ‘n’ roll. Through national record labels like Okeh and Columbia based in Washington D.C. and New York, and local producers like H.C. Speir, the music expanded outside of its geographic origins. Distributed under the genre of race records—black music targeted towards black audiences—general store owners sold these records in major southern cities like Memphis and Jackson during the 1930s. The music also reached new audiences through radio and distribution of records in northern cities like Chicago and New York. But despite gaining some popular attention, the blues was anything but a pop music. Social theorist Amiri Baraka wrote that, “Even though its birth and growth seems connected finally to the general movement of the mass of black Americans into the central culture of the country, blues still went back for its impetus and emotional meaning to the individual, to his completely personal life and death.” While Baraka was writing from the perspective of the 1960s when blues had gained international popularity his words demonstrate that at its heart, blues music derived its power from the black individual and their personal life experiences. While these experiences may hold universal overtones that eventually connected America’s black population “into the central culture,” those overtones derived from individual relationships to specific regional cultures. As a music specific to its region, the Delta blues chronicled in the Fisk project grew out of the musicians’ relationship with contemporary 1940s Delta.

12 Ted Gioia. *Delta Blues: The Live and Times of the Mississippi Masters who Revolutionized American Music.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 52. These national recording labels often recorded the musicians at satellite studios in New Orleans and Memphis to avoid travel fees, but some record labels like Paramount would bring musicians to their studios all the way in Grafton, Wisconsin.

Transforming the Delta

The region dubbed “the Mississippi Delta” is the stretch of land in northwest Mississippi bordered by two rivers; the Mississippi to the west and the Yazoo to the east. The land itself was generally a mixture of thick forest and swampland. Coupled with this impenetrable terrain, the region was subject to constant flooding as it sits centrally within the Mississippi River flood plain. However, following the end of the Reconstruction era, Mississippi looked to the Delta as a means of renovating the state’s failing economy. This renovation was a part of a movement to create a ‘New South,’ where southern states attempted to rejuvenate their collectively poor economic productivity. Socio-economic historian Robert L. Brandfon wrote, “Primarily [the goal of the New South] was a unanimous desire to achieve for the South an economic position equal to that of the North.” This desire could manifest itself in different forms like industrialization, but the primary method of invigorating the southern economy was to take advantage of its natural agricultural resources. These ‘New South’ policies would revitalize Mississippi’s economic infrastructure through the transformation of the southern plantation system. Consequently, these new policies created new socio-economic turmoil by objectifying black labor, inspiring black musicians to create a new genre of music known as the Delta blues.

Beginning in the 1870s and ’80s, logging companies would start an almost forty year process of clearing the Delta of its hardwood forests and exposing the rich soil of the region. Simultaneous to the deforestation of the Delta, Mississippi implemented a system of levees tasked with containing the two rivers in order to drain the swamplands and insure the safety of the agricultural property. The newly cleared land exposed the rich topsoil created by years of silt

15 Brandfon 2.
deposits left over from flooding. The soil was so fertile that economic historians would come to
call the area the “Alluvial Empire.” Through the combination of the deforestation and levee
systems, Mississippi contributed roughly 5 million acres of virgin soil to the New South by the
early twentieth century. This soil would provide the foundation for the implementation of a
neo-plantation system, a system that combined the agricultural standards of the Old South—the
combination of cheap labor and vast agricultural resources—with industrialized methods of
production. Wealthy southerners bought vast sums of land within the Delta with the intention of
harvesting the southern cash crop of cotton. According to a 1913 Bureau of Agricultural
Economics study, the majority of plantation owners controlled land from 360 to several thousand
acres, and in order to run these massive plantations white landowners turned to Mississippi’s
black labor force.

In the 1860s the Delta’s combined population of whites and blacks numbered
approximately 36,800 people; the black population totaled 30,274 people, about 83 percent of
the total population. With the implementation of the new plantation system, the population
skyrocketed. By 1940, twenty years following the neo-plantation system’s most productive years,
the population numbered over half a million people, the majority of whom lived on plantations.
For example, the city of Clarksdale in Coahoma County was the largest city within the Delta. Its
population in 1940 numbered 12,000 people (10,000 of whom were black). The majority of
people worked as sharecroppers or day laborers on levee camps and road construction.

17 Brandfon 23.
18 Woods 44.
19 Woodruff 23.
20 James C. Cobb. The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity. (New
21 Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov. Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress
Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 229.
22 Gordon 229.
was not a high paying profession, forcing most blues performers to employ their musical talents as side gigs.

(Map of the black farming community circa 1920, note the Mississippi Delta is almost entirely filled in.)

Economic Enslavement

Following the traditions of the Old South plantations, most of the mega-plantations grew the cash crop cotton. However, without the bound labor of slavery, the New South plantations established a new system to ensure profits. When describing the new system historian Nan-Eizabeth Woodruff wrote, "[Plantation owners] employed the methods of scientific management to produce larger and more efficient cotton crop and, in the process, achieved a control over their labor force that would have been the envy of any planter twenty years earlier." It was this regimented "scientific" form of farming that allowed for these plantations to work on such large scales. White landowners divided their plantations into small plots, renting primarily to black tenant families. The landowner would provide tools, seed, supplies, and housing for the tenant

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24 Woodruff 21.
family in a process called ‘furnishing.’ The tenant was expected to pay for rent and supplies through their labor on the fields. However, in addition to being given supplies during planting season, landowners would gain further income through credit systems known as ‘rationing.’ According to anthropologist Lewis Jones, “The ['rationing' system] is simply supplying groceries and necessities to a tenant during the crop production season. In this type of furnishing the tenant does not know the money value of what he is receiving or, to be more exact, what he is being charged for it.” Essentially the landowners would overcharge the tenants for the rations provided in off seasons, forcing the tenants into debt. In some cases landowners would give tenants credit only accepted at the local plantation store, naturally owned by the same landowner. The furnishing system created a credit scheme that ensured all loans cycled back into the plantation. It also ensured that laborers would remain on the plantation for extended periods due to debt, creating a relatively stable labor force. Tenants might pick up and move to new plantations. However, landowners could be assured a new tenant would take over due to the lack of employment options.

Although the majority of Delta blacks worked within the plantation system, levee camps provided the other viable option for labor. As the plantations provided the greatest source of income within the region at the time, heavy emphasis was placed on containing the rivers in order to protect the crops. However, these levee camps were equally if not more corrupt than then plantation systems. In an interview, blues artist Memphis Slim recalled how the camps employed a similar method of rationing in order to create a system of debt, entrapping laborers. Slim recalled, “Most of us didn’t know how to read and write and figure so they charged us what they wanted. They charged us $25 for a side of...side meat or something like that, and we had to stay

25 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07).
26 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07).
there ‘til we paid for that and we didn’t know how much we were getting—maybe we get 25 cents a day...something like that. So when we get ready to leave, says [sic], ‘Well, you owe me $400.’ I mean, for eating and sleeping.” 27 Slim’s anecdote illustrates how the furnishing system of the plantations reappeared within other occupations, constantly taking advantage of the poorly educated working class citizens. By overcharging for seed, tools, or in this case meat, white overseers could force the laborers to work until they paid their debt, essentially working for free. In the Delta the average black citizen graduated from grade school. 28 However, this statistic is misleading as most children were expected to assist their families working in the fields and therefore only attended school sporadically. The combination of the unsupportive economy and poor educational system restrained the socio-economic mobility of the black community, confining them to lower class citizenship. 29 In addition to socio-economic strife true to most southern communities in the early twentieth century, the black community of the Delta faced extreme forms of racial violence.

Finding Blue Inspiration

Made evident by the sanctioned corruption of landowners within the New South, Reconstruction had done little to quash the racially charged aggression of whites on the newly freed black community. Historian Jeff Todd Titon wrote, “By the 1920s, Jim Crow laws prohibiting black people from white public facilities were firmly established down home.” 30 Alongside the strict segregation seen within the region, lynchings were also common occurrences.

28 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07).
30 Titon 15.
According to statistics compiled by the NAACP, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, the seventeen counties lying wholly or partly in the Delta witnessed a total of sixty-six lynchings. This figure accounted for over 35 percent of the 188 confirmed lynchings in the state during this period. From 1900 through 1930, this seventeen-county area averaged a lynching every 5.5 months.\(^{31}\)

The lynching of Emmett Till, one of the most infamous racially charged murders during the Jim Crow era, took place in Tallahatchie County on the eastern boarder of the Delta in August 1955.\(^{32}\) Till was 15 year-old boy from Chicago visiting his grandmother in the Delta when he was brutally beaten to death for supposedly whistling at a white woman. While this racial violence was not unique to the Delta, it certainly influenced the creation of the blues as the black community had to live in constant fear of white rage.

Blues represented a way for Delta musicians to speak about their oppression, and speak in a way that would not draw unwanted attention. Memphis Slim said, “Blues is kind of revenge, you know. You wanta say something, and you wanta, you know, signifyin’ like—that’s the blues, like a, you know, we all fellers, we had a hard time in life and like that, and things we couldn’t say…or do, so we sing it. I mean we sing…”\(^{33}\) But while blues took “revenge” for interracial violence, the Delta also fostered other forms of violence to inspire blues music.

Due to their secluded locations along the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers, levee camps were sights of constant violence not just between the white supervisors and black laborers, but also amongst the black laborers. When recollecting his time on levee camp work crews, Memphis Slim recalled that levee camps were sights devoid of civil law. Workers were free to inflict violence upon one another so long as it did not affect the work process. Slim stated, “If you were

\(^{31}\) Cobb 114. The term lynching does not necessarily refer specifically to hanging enacted by the public. It refers to any racially charged murder.


\(^{33}\) *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, track 6.
a good worker, you could kill anybody down there, so long as he's colored. You could kill anybody—you could go anywhere.34 Men would quarrel over women, gambling debts, or simply food. Many workers carried guns for protection as the overseers provided little security from their fellow laborers. Following the protocol of the southern social hierarchy, black workers did not dare attack the white overseers even if they were greatly outnumbered. Big Bill Broonzy, a bluesman who also worked in levee camps, recalled an incident where a white overseer broke up a fight and proceeded to whip one of the workers. The white man was armed only with a whip and black man was armed with a .45 caliber pistol, but the white man had no fear the worker would ever use his gun on his social superior.35 While some historians like Paul Oliver have read these stories as evidence of the Delta as a lawless frontier, these stories are actually more reflective of the extreme responses to the structural violence faced within the region. According to Delta historian Kim Lacy Rogers, “Between 1900 and 1930, African Americans accounted for 67 percent of the killers in Mississippi, and 80 percent of the victims.”36 Structural violence occurs when a society enacts policies that deprive a specific group of basic rights, such as food and shelter. The levee camps represent a space outside of the cultural norm where blacks were stripped of their economic securities and pushed to extremes to ensure survival.

**Early Civil Actions and Social Reactions**

With the aid of the NAACP and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, southern blacks attempted to stand up to the socio-political oppressions forced upon them by southern whites. The NAACP and STFU attempted to unionize the black labor force as a means of confronting

34 Blues in the Mississippi Night, track 6.
35 Blues in the Mississippi Night, track 7.
the mega-plantation system. They publicized the intolerable working conditions and racial abuse black sharecroppers faced.\footnote{Woodruff 112.} Writers like Ida B. Wells published essays in national magazines detailing the horrors inflicted upon southern black communities by white lynch mobs, but these activists gained little success. In some cases they even instigated greater scenes of violence as the white community lashed out with force to protect the status quo. In one instance, "law enforcement authorities and local planters shot, beat, evicted and even killed some of the sharecroppers who tried to organize [with the aid of the STFU] and strike for $1 wages."\footnote{Rogers 26.} It was not until the 1940s when political demands for equality began to take effect as the introduction of WWII and the declining population of the Delta due to the Great Migration swayed favor towards the black community.

While these activist groups attempted to force the Delta to change via local politics, the people of the region reacted to the oppression in two primary ways. Church culture was the original social response to the hardships of the Delta. Communities would rely heavily upon their local pastors for support and guidance. The blacks within the Delta generally practiced the teachings of Southern Baptism which demanded a very close following of the bible and regular church attendance. Gospel and hymns were the popular music of this subculture. While many blues performers were Christians and some, like Son House, even had stints as pastors, blues music was seen as a pastime unworthy of the Lord.\footnote{AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07).} This rejection of blues by the church created a second culture, blues culture.

In 1902, Sears priced their acoustic guitars at $2.75.\footnote{Gioia 324.} As a result, this cheap mobile instrument became the defining companion to Delta bluesmen. Musicologist Ted Gioia explains
that in Delta blues, "A single instrument, the guitar, mostly stands self-sufficient, cradled by the singer, who treats it with tough love, sometimes, slapping it in a percussive accompaniment, or playing it with a knife or the neck of a broken bottle of some other objet trouvé unknown to Parkening or Segovia." These performers, mostly men, would learn to play from the older generations within their local communities. Songs were written in a traditional 12-bar blues style of AAB with open chord structures, allowing musicians to fill the space with their incredible virtuosity. While many of these men were musically illiterate, their technical prowess was second to none. Many modern musicians consider Robert Johnson, a popular performer from the late 30s, to be the greatest guitar player of the recorded era, if not ever. After honing their craft through hours of practice, performers would play in local clubs and bars around the Delta, providing the nighttime entertainment for local tenant farmers. The music's distinct tone and often provocative lyrics embedded it within the night culture of the Delta, placing it at odds with the church. It was the church that gave the blues its association with Satan as the music promoted devilish activities like drinking and promiscuity. But the music and its culture received great support from the younger generations within the Delta. Blues culture rejected social norms, allowing Delta communities to remove themselves from the hardships of their socio-economic status, at the same time mocking that status through the music. Although blues culture derived from the pressures of the Delta, it was not confined to the region as industrialization of the New South had brought new forms of transportation that gave the musicians and subsequently the music the ability to travel.

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41 Gioia 5. Parkening and Segovia were two world renowned classical guitarists. Gioia's reference to these two classical masters is to underscore how Delta players were completely innovative with their playing styles, free from the conventions of standard western music.

42 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770.
Them Changes: Mobility in the Delta

Despite its late development and its remote location, the Delta was a very mobile region. With cotton as the primary cash crop, state legislators understood that to have a stable economy based around raw natural materials they needed to renovate the railroads. While cotton was grown in the South, southern states still depended upon the demand of textile industries. "The price of cotton [depended] on the world market, and demands for the crop are measured by prices established in New York and Liverpool." As a result of the national and international demands, the 'New South' Delta quickly industrialized its transportation systems. By 1902 the Mississippi Delta had an extensive system of railways including its own Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, as well as the interstate Illinois Central Railroad directly connecting the region to the cities of Memphis and Chicago. As a result of these extensive rail lines, the people of the Delta were fairly mobile, including the black population. Blues performers demonstrated the accessibility of travel to the people through their music and through their travels. In 1903 W.C. Handy, one of the first blues aficionados and collectors, documented a song with a refrain, "Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog." While the lyrics seem cryptic, their message remained quite simple. The "Southern" referred to a large rail line across the bottom of the Delta, and the "Dog" referred to the Yazoo Delta rail line. Therefore, the lyrics are simply informative, giving the performer's desired destination. These nicknames would reappear within other tunes, demonstrating mobility both as a theme within the music and a practical means of reaching new audiences. The popularity of race records in the 20s and 30s demonstrated that the music itself was mobile by appearing in cities from Jackson to Memphis, but the rail system helps to demonstrate that the musicians too were mobile.

43 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07).
44 Brandfon 84. See Appendix.
45 Gioia 33.
A second indication of mobility within region was the popularity of juke joints. Juke joints were local nightclubs where blues and other forms of secular music could be heard. These clubs existed everywhere from cities to towns to the plantations themselves. These bars were so popular that whites realized they could capitalize on the local industry by enveloping the nightlife under the furnishing system. "The Stovall Plantation built a juke joint for its workers—right next to the commissary, which supplied it; the farm got its cut of everything." Yet, the popularity of juke joints illustrates that within the primarily rural population subject to geographic isolation, people were mobile, travelling to clubs and creating a larger regionally unified community. Performers could move between juke joints as a means of developing a fan base and audiences could likewise move about to hear new performers. And these rural communities were not isolated from one another, evident in the example of the city of Clarksdale. During weekends and especially during the growing season, the city witnessed a mass influx of the surrounding rural population as people looked for entertainment and shopping. The flood of people in and out of Clarksdale illustrates a sense of freedom within the black community unknown to the Old South. Plantation work no longer isolated workers from the surrounding community; during the weeknights and on weekends laborers were free to go and do as they pleased. With greater mobility, the sense of community extended well outside the boundaries of the plantation, expanding regionally.

The final indication of blues mobility was the mass exodus from the region known as the Great Migration. During the twenties and thirties a massive number of southern black families migrated north to industrialized cities like Chicago and New York in hopes of finding better labor conditions; of the 400,000 blacks to migrate by 1920, 100,000 came from Mississippi.47

46 Gordon 8.
47 Woodruff 40.
Between 1930 and 1950 another 31,000 blacks left the Delta. This regional migration gained some success for black workers during the 30s as the reduction in population gave them some political clout, but with the U.S.’s entry into WWII in the 1940s, these migrations gave white farmers a true scare. Blues historian Robert Gordon writes, “With World War II looming and the North’s factory work heating up, and with the threat of mechanization ever greater in the South, the Great Migration was achieving epic proportions. Farmers were afraid of losing their help before they could afford the technology that would replace them.” As a result sharecroppers and day laborers saw relatively significant rises in wages, as cotton picking rose from $1.50 up to $2.00. The national pressures upon the Delta to provide labor for the war movement subsequently challenged the status quo of the Delta by removing the cheap labor source. Seen in the vaulted payments of day laborers, the stress of the nation ironically gave black labor greater autonomy within the region due to simple demand. But this small victory was not enough, as demonstrated by the continued migration out of the Delta.

**Rising Tides: The Significance of Blues Culture in the 1940s**

Exhibited by the urbanizing community and the waning agricultural economy, the 1940s was a period of transition and transformation within the Delta. Where white oppression of the past decades had fragmented the black population through isolation and racial violence, the combination of new technologies and old cultural similarities fostered a new sense of regional community. Railroads and highways signified mobilization to the once isolated rural populations, allowing the people to move both locally and nationally. The introduction of war amplified these changes as Delta blacks had to negotiate their relationship to the region as well as the nation.

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48 Woods 127.
49 Gordon 37.
During this charged period of change in the early 1940s, a group of ethnographers intrigued by the Delta's folklore and music devised a trip to document the culture and its famous music.

In the summers of 1941 and 1942, ethnomusicologists from Fisk University and the Library of Congress set out to record and document the music and culture of the Mississippi Delta. Alan Lomax, Assistant Curator at the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, would lead the expedition. His colleagues were two members of the social science division of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee: musicologist John W. Work and sociologist Lewis W. Jones (on the trip a series of Fisk undergrad and graduate students acted as Jones' assistants). Originally planned by John Work as a private project under the University, Fisk President Thomas E. Jones extended an invitation to the Library in order to expand the project's resources and man power. While Work proposed the project, his senior colleague Dr. Charles S. Johnson was set to act as project leader. Johnson, a well respected sociologist who specialized in southern culture, was one of the primary reasons behind Lomax's agreement to partner the expedition. However, when Johnson declined to head the project in the preliminary meetings in the spring of '41, this ironically worked in Lomax's favor as the group named him project director.

Following these early discussions, the ethnographers met in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in late August of 1941 to begin their field research. Clarksdale was the chosen destination because it represented the densest concentration of blacks in the most heavily black populated region in America; a place they believed would provide the greatest number of musicians per capita. Within this trip the placement of Lomax as leader of the project presented a paradoxical social dynamic. Lomax would be a white man from the capital directing a team of southern black

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50 Marybeth Hamilton. *In Search of the Blues: Black voices, white visions.* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 118.
51 Lost Delta Found 9.
52 Lost Delta Found 10.
ethnographers documenting southern black music at a time when the black community was still negotiating its own unification.
SECTION II

Lomax's Many Tunes: Alan Lomax, the Blues, and the Working Class

In the spring of 1941 Alan Lomax travelled to Nashville, Tennessee to attend an ethnographic conference at Fisk University. Following the conference Lomax and members of the university’s sociology and music departments met to discuss the possibility of a joint project between Fisk University and the Library of Congress’s Folk Song department. As Assistant Curator at the Library’s Folk Song archive, Alan Lomax saw the project as an opportunity to bolster the Library’s black folk music collection, music he had grown up with in Texas. At the spring meetings the two sides established that as the Library of Congress would provide the recording equipment and a great deal of funding, Lomax would take the position of project leader. The original plans scheduled for a three-year long recording project where the team would travel to an agreed space within the Delta to record its music and document its culture. While this original plan shrunk into a much smaller project spanning the length of two summers, Lomax remained at its helm until its conclusion in the fall of 1942.

Within the Fisk University/Library of Congress project Alan Lomax represents a paradoxical and somewhat controversial character. Prior to his work in the Delta, Lomax had experience in the field of ethnomusicology. He worked alongside his father John, a fellow folklorist and collector, but the Fisk study would be his first major project as director. Throughout his life Lomax was an advocate of the working class and used his position at the Library to promote the working class through music. Lomax perceived the Fisk trip as a moment within the early stages of America’s war mobilization to promote the black working class and bring its plight to the forefront of American thought. But in his attempt to support the Delta’s

55 Lost Delta Found 9-10.
working class peoples his popular front politics caused him to form a perpetual essentialist
perspective of Delta culture, overlooking the progression Delta blacks had made on their own.

Young Alan

Born on January 31, 1915, in Austin, Texas, Alan Lomax began his career as a folklorist
at the age of seventeen.\textsuperscript{56} Originally a professor at Harvard and University of Texas, Alan’s
father John Lomax, like many Americans found himself out of work at the beginning of the
1930s. As a means of supporting his family and career in academia, John Lomax converted his
hobby for documenting folk music into his profession.\textsuperscript{57} In the summer of 1932 in the midst of
the Great Depression, John Lomax received a grant for a book on American folk ballads from
MacMillan publishing.\textsuperscript{58} Alan and his older brother John Jr. accompanied their father on the trip
as assistants; it would be Alan’s first experience as a folk collector and ethnomusicologist. The
Lomaxes would record music throughout America over the next two years, but focus most of
their study on the South. The trip finally culminated in a book authored by both John and Alan
entitled \textit{American Ballads and Folk Songs}, published in 1934.\textsuperscript{59} Within this collection the
Lomaxes focused on obtaining music they perceived as containing cultural purity, music that
reflected the culture of its creators, not music popularized to meet the demands of mainstream
America.

As a folklorist, John Lomax’s interest lay in discovering and recording the music of
America’s marginalized communities, places that maintained and fostered their unique musical

\textsuperscript{56} David Dicaire. \textit{The Early Years of Folk Music: Fifty Founders of the Tradition.} (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2010). 203
\textsuperscript{57} Hamilton 72-73.
\textsuperscript{59} Marybeth Hamilton. \textit{In Search of the Blues: Black voices, white visions.} (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 105.
traditions; an interest he would pass on to his son. According to folk historian Benjamin Filene, "The Lomaxes hoped to find the old styles ‘dammed up’ in America’s more isolated areas. They collected from remote cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, lumber camps, and, with particular success, segregated prisons. John Lomax believed that prisons had inadvertently done folklorists a service by isolating groups of informants from modern society."60 To the Lomaxes, the removal or isolation from mainstream pop-culture gave these marginalized people’s culture and music greater authenticity as it grew from community, not from assimilation. These working class peoples represented true Americans, as their culture developed in isolation of any foreign influences, demonstrating only the values of the immediate community.

Where John Lomax saw his research as a means of discovering new unheard and undocumented music, Alan saw the research as a political way to vocalize the plights of these marginalized peoples. These opposing visions of their own research would eventually divide the Lomaxes, but not before their studies caught the attention of the Library of Congress. Based on their body of work and their interests in the folk, the Library offered both John and Alan employment as folk song collectors and would subsequently appoint Alan to the official position of Assistant Curator at the Archive of Folk Song in 1936.61

The support from the Library derived from the liberal bureaucratic administration of newly appointed democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt. Under his New Deal programs, Roosevelt used government finances to assist unemployed Americans, particularly the marginalized peoples of the rural population. "The federal government’s move to embrace America’s marginal populations was signaled first by Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. In marked contrast to Herbert Hoover’s administration, the Roosevelts worked in both their rhetoric and actions to move rural

60 Filene 50.
61 Szwed 104.
whites and minorities to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness.”

Through programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of 1936 and the Federal Writer’s Project, many of America’s unemployed people received federal support as FDR attempted to rebuild the infrastructure of the American economy by supporting its various working classes; this included both the artists and the folklorists. To the Roosevelt administration, folk music represented a means of connecting to the rural working class people and gaining their support for their democratic platform. To Lomax, folk music like the Delta’s represented a way to illustrate the people that actually constituted the American public.

During his schooling years at Harvard and University of Texas, Lomax became friends with many leftist and communist sympathizers including writer Zora Neale Hurston and New York University professor Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, who Lomax referred to as Miss Barnicle. Influenced by these relationships, especially with Miss Barnicle, Lomax reimagined his role as folklorist. Under the apprenticeship of his father, Lomax understood the role of folklorist as a serious academic study, documenting the music as evidence of culture free of his own political input. On his own, Lomax believed his duty as a folklorist was not just to document folk music, but to promote it on behalf of the folk peoples. These sentiments grew stronger within Lomax while stationed at the Library due to his constant confrontations with politicians he believed did not represent the people, but rather their own bourgeois agendas. Filene describes Lomax’s reimagined politicized role as a musical “middleman,” as Lomax was the filter between the folk artists and the mass public. At the Library of Congress Alan Lomax’s official position was as a

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62 Filene 134.
63 Szwed 106-107.
65 Filene 7.
folk archivist, but he also negotiated for a position hosting a radio show as part of his contract.\(^{66}\) This radio program was a space the middle man used to introduce the public to folk, playing all folk recordings and hosting live performances by folk artists like Woody Guthrie.\(^{67}\) Through his position at the Library and as a radio host, he could bring folk to the capital and confront what he called the "bush-wa town" of Washington with working class issues.\(^{68}\)

Another example of this middleman political agenda appeared in Lomax’s comments on mainstream patriotic songs of the 40s. When speaking about the music performed at military camps in the summer of 1940, Lomax stated plainly, “I need not overstress my opinion that ‘God Bless America’ and Katie Smith are both extremely dull and mediocre. They have both been elevated to an artificially astronomical position by the power of mass advertising and the star system.”\(^{69}\) These traditional patriotic songs did not speak of the people within the country, only the country’s ideals. To Lomax, the “star system” reflected the bourgeois corporate marketing he loathed rather than people that embodied America. Through his status as a popular front “middle man” Lomax believed he could reform American identity through folk music to value the working class peoples and subsequently create a united working class peoples through their commonality of music.

From the time of his first experiences driving around with his father through the American South to the summer of 1941 Alan Lomax would travel to Haiti, the Appalachians, Wisconsin, and Tennessee to record folk music. In that time he and his father collected over seven hundred records worth of folk music holding between two and twelve songs each for the

\(^{66}\) Szwed 154.  
\(^{67}\) Szwed 157.  
\(^{68}\) Szwed 105.  
\(^{69}\) Szwed 168.
archive. But despite all his experience within the field and in the recording studios, Lomax was still only twenty-six years old when he travelled to Clarksdale in August of 1941 to begin the Fisk University project, five years junior to Lewis Jones and fourteen years junior to John W. Work.

**Alan: The Middle Man in the Delta**

Before arriving in Clarksdale in late August, 1941, Alan Lomax sent out two memorandums. The first was addressed to his director at the Library outlining the agreed plan of action for Lomax and the ethnographers. In his memorandum to Director Harold Spivacke, Lomax relayed:

The agreed upon study was to explore objectively and exhaustively the musical habits of a single Negro community in the Delta, to find out and describe the function of music in the community and ascertain the history of music in the community, and to document adequately the cultural and social backgrounds for music in the community. It was felt that this type of study, carried on in a number of types of southern communities would afford: (1) an oral history of Negro music in the South over the past hundred years; (2) describe music in the community objectively, giving all criteria for taste and the relationship of music to the dynamics of social change; and (3) result in the widely varied and completely documented set of basic recorded musical materials.

The “single negro community” that the group settled on was Clarksdale. As the largest city in the Delta it provided the greatest number of potential subjects. Its proximity to plantations also made it an excellent hub for exploring the other types of southern communities without having to travel too far. As stated in the memorandum, the purpose of the trip was to objectively document the music, and trace its socio-political history in order to understand the Delta culture. As a means of preparing the Fisk ethnographers, Lomax sent a second memorandum to Dr. Johnson at Fisk. Within the letter, Lomax enclosed a list of works and authors he believed would prepare the

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70 Filene 136.
71 Szwed 176.
Fisk students for their experience in the Delta. The list included the works ranged from contemporary sociologists like Howard Odum of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, to Lomax's Fisk colleagues John Work and Johnson, as well as his own books.\(^{72}\) This list also included his friend Zora Neale Hurston's collection of black fables and short stories, *Mules and Men*. These stories offered literary insight into rural black folklore, as well as fostering empathy for the rural southern blacks by demonstrating specific examples of the oppression they faced.\(^{73}\)

On August 25, Lomax travelled to Nashville where he met with Johnson and Work to discuss any pressing matters before the fieldwork recordings finally got underway.\(^{74}\) Finally on the 29\(^{th}\), Lomax and Work arrived in Clarksdale, where Lewis Jones and his assisting sociology students greeted them.\(^{75}\) Jones had travelled to Clarksdale a few weeks ahead of the rest of the team to do preliminary ethnographic work and finding musical leads so that recording could begin upon Lomax and Work's arrival.\(^{76}\) Jones's prelude to their arrival was necessary as Lomax and the recording equipment were only available for a week's time due to other engagements with the Library. Lomax and Work agreed that this first week in the Delta was merely a preface to a much longer recording session during the following summer. Upon their arrival, the team would receive mixed feelings from the public. Many whites did not like their presence in the region, believing them to be northern union representatives looking for laborers.\(^{77}\) Contrastingly, Jones noted that the team received a warm welcoming from the black community, as they

\(^{72}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), Folder 8.


\(^{74}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), Folder 8.

\(^{75}\) Gordon 37.

\(^{76}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), Folder 3.

\(^{77}\) Gordon 37.
believed the study would help them in some manner, whether by vocalizing the oppression of the South, or merely receiving some unexpected income.\(^7^8\)

After recording a few gospel choirs and sermons on his first days in town, Lomax along with John Work travelled to the Stovall Plantation to record a bluesman recommended by Lewis Jones. From his two weeks in Clarksdale prior to the rest of the team's arrival, Jones had found a list of potential performers to record, one being Muddy Waters. During this late summer session Lomax would record three original tunes, conducting a brief interview in between the tracks.

After performing the first song, "Country Blues," Lomax opened his interview questioning Waters on his song's origins and inspiration. In one of his first questions Lomax asked, "Do you remember where you were when you were doing your singing? I mean, how it happened? I mean, where you were sitting, what you were thinking about?" To this Waters replied that he was thinking about a puncture in his car's tire and a girl who mistreated him. But this was not enough for Lomax; he then asked, "Tell me the, tell me a little of the story of it, if you don't mind? I mean, if it's not too personal. I mean I want to know... the facts on how you felt and why you felt. I mean that's a very beautiful song."\(^7^9\) While Lomax acknowledged the personal nature of his question, Waters politely responded stating, "Well, I just felt blue."\(^8^0\) Lomax followed these opening questions inquiring about Water's musical past and the development of his style. However, the opening questions reveal how Lomax's popular front politics influenced his role within the trip. His demand to know the "facts" behind Waters' performance underscored his essentialist view on the music. As highlighted by Amiri Baraka, blues is a personal music, founded upon individual experiences. Lomax's interest in the "facts" behind the music showed a misunderstanding of the formation of the blues. The term "facts" implied that there was a

\(^{78}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), Folder 3.
\(^{79}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770a1.
\(^{80}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770a1.
formula to which all bluesmen ascribed. To Lomax, the blues was a folk music with strong
universal overtones that presented a united image of working class struggles and concerns. But
this understanding essentialized the blues, overlooking the specific socio-political issues of the
Delta and the region's own steps in progressing in spite of those restraints.

Lomax and Work concluded their excursion into the Delta on the 5th of September,
having recorded and documented over twelve hours of Delta music. They scheduled to
continue recording during the following summer. In a letter to Spivacke on the 21st of August,
Lomax placed an official request for a total of $580 to pay for records, mileage, and salary for
his trip into the Delta and his recordings in Virginia en route back to Washington, meaning the
time in the Delta actually cost less than that amount. In the meantime Lewis Jones made
repeated trips back into the Delta to continue his sociological studies, relaying his findings back
to Johnson and Lomax. In one of his notebooks Lomax wrote out a budget that totaled $43,500—
presumably used over a three year period—covering travel and equipment expenses, workers'
salaries, performers' compensation, and publishing rights. While Lomax submitted his original
budget before the United States officially entered WWII, this was an incredible sum desired for
field research for a country coming out of the worst economic depression in its history. Lomax
would not receive the entirety of this budget and the funding would become even more
constrained once war was declared on Japan in December of 1941. The second summer in the
Delta actually cost a total of $1,573.65 (and a combined cost of $2,153.63 over the year) a far cry
from Lomax's $43,500, but Lomax's notes highlight the degree of his investment in the
project. This excessive budget shows first the amount of time Lomax was willing to devote to

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81 Lost Delta Found 16.
82 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), Folder 8.
83 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (07.03.08).
84 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 8).
the project and second it gives his quantitative estimation of the project’s worth to folk culture as a whole.

Despite his physical absence from the Delta, Lomax received updates on the research proceedings from Lewis Jones over the winter months. In his letters, Jones informed Lomax of the increase in agricultural labor demand following his departure. He also gave Lomax information on the best times to record during the next summer, following the agricultural ‘lay-by’ season, where crop growth demanded little attention of the farmers. Where Jones gave Lomax information to improve recording productivity as a whole during the next summer, Lomax’s interest remained focused within his essentialized blues.

Over the winter, Lomax gave Jones two letters with direct instructions. In November, Lomax wrote Jones, pushing him to interview the bluesman Son House on his relationship to the late Robert Johnson. Lomax’s continued interest in Johnson further highlighted his essentialist perspective of the blues as he searched for more information and evidence on a musician he predetermined as the best example of Delta blues. Then on January 21, 1942, after describing the “general hysteria” of Washington following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Lomax instructed Jones to find informants of a specific mold. He wanted people who had “charm, eloquence, and honor, and with important things to say.” This switch in focus to specific criteria outside of musical talents underscored Lomax’s interest to hear and voice how the Delta would react to the nation at war. Within the moment expected to draw a mass sympathy toward the nation, Lomax saw it as a period for social change specifically for the working class. By exhibiting the voices of the Delta at a time of national unification, Lomax could play on the moment of national unity to cultivate sympathetic audiences to the plight of the Delta and subsequently the working class.

85 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 3).
86 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 8).
87 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 8).
Another way Lomax stayed connected to the Delta was through his correspondence with one of the bluesmen he recorded in '41, Son House. Prior to meeting Lomax, House had a somewhat successful career as a bluesman a decade earlier at the height of blues' popularity. During the winter lull in the Fisk recordings, Lomax attempted to bring House to New York as part of a touring folk group. On Christmas Eve of '41, Lomax wrote House asking him to travel to New York City to perform as a member of a folk compilation concert. Lomax explained that House would have to pay for his travel far to the city, but once there, the organizing group would see to his care as well as his payment for a number of performances. While House showed some interest in joining Lomax in New York, he could not find the necessary funds to leave the Delta. Not easily deterred, Lomax would write to House again on January 28th and a third time on March 10th each time pleading with House to come to New York. But without any funding assistance for his travels, House was tied to his plantation. Lomax's persistency conveyed his deep desires to display the Delta's music. The performances in New York, the nation's cultural hub, would have been a way for Lomax to display the blues on a national stage, confronting America with the issues of the working class.

In the summer of '42, Lomax finally made his return to the Delta along with John Work and Jones. Prior to arriving in the Delta, Lomax devised a questionnaire to give to all the people interviewed during the project. The questionnaire included general sociological questions of age, sex, education, family history, living arrangements, employment status, alongside a specific section on music and musical taste. Over a month long span during the lay-by season, Lomax and his colleagues recorded over 700 tracks of music and interviews. He also gave his questionnaire to many musicians as well as taking his own notes on the happenings in Clarksdale.

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88 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11).
89 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11).
90 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (07.03.45)
Through the analysis of their field notes and the questionnaires, Lomax and the team discovered trends within their interviews in the generations of Delta peoples based on musical taste and mobility. They divided the Delta peoples into four generations: the river (ages 70s and up), the railroad (ages 40s-60s), the highway (ages 20s-30s) and the youth. Lomax’s correlation between age and the available modes of transit demonstrated the social amplification of mobility during the 40s. Lomax’s essentialist perspective distracted him from noticing the trends of mobility that demonstrated the people’s expression independence, progressing collectively without the assistance of his popular front politics.

While Lomax’s interviews focused on the music’s history, his field notes picked up on the immediate commotions within the Delta as America mobilized for war. On August 9, 1942, Lomax witnessed a parade in Clarksdale of over 400 black soldiers.91 The soldiers marched through town where other Delta blacks came to witness the spectacle. Before the primarily black audience, a speech was read in the honor of the enlisted soldiers. In his notes, Lomax noted the consistent use of the term “citizen” within the speech. The combination of the parade, the black audience and the language within the speech all highlight the connection within the Delta to the nation. The repetition of citizen within this moment showed that the black community perceived enlistment as a demonstration of national conscription, but also a means of asserting their own political agenda. Enlisting or aiding the army was the duty of citizens. By conscripting to the national movement, blacks could lay claim to citizenship and all its inalienable rights, countering the regional oppression that limited their rights. Similar politics were expressed around the country in the movement known as the Double V, meaning victory over enemies abroad and victory over racism at home.92

91 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (07.03.14)
92 Singh 123.
Lomax would finally leave the Delta in late August, and return to Washington to fulfill his own duties to a nation at war. The army would enlist Lomax’s services in the Office of War Information, where he would work creating compilations and performances of music intended to promote morale.\(^93\) Due to his war responsibilities, Lomax relinquished his role within the project, leaving it in the hands of his successor, Ben Botkin. But under new direction the project became secondary to the war effort, eventually seeing any hopes of its continuation fade out by the end of ’42.

**Alan’s Memory**

In the years following the Fisk project, Lomax would continue his career as a folklorist. However, his leftist leanings forced him to take up new research outside of American soil. From his time in the army and following WWII, the FBI marked Lomax as a potential political threat due to his leftist associations.\(^94\) Though he was never formally charged, Lomax moved to Great Britain during the McCarthy Era under self-imposed exile recording European folk music as means of continuing his career in folklore without fear of prosecution.\(^95\) During his years in exile he began a piece on the Delta that went unfinished and upon his return to America in the late 50s, subsequent projects distracted him. It was not until 1993, fifty years after the end of the project, that Lomax would finally publish his findings from the summers of ’41 and ’42. In 1993, Alan Lomax released a memoir entitled, *The Land Where the Blues Began*. Lomax’s memoirs on the Fisk project would be his last publication as a folklorist and ethnomusicologist.\(^96\) These memoirs have come under heavy criticism from blues scholars like Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov as

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\(^93\) Szwed 201.
\(^94\) Szwed 203.
\(^95\) Szwed 267.
\(^96\) Szwed 389-390.
Lomax appears to take liberties within the memoirs, stretching historical facts and redefining the Delta through a romanticized perspective.\footnote{Gioia 194.} Despite its flaws, this memoir holds vital information to understanding the project and Lomax. By looking past Lomax’s modern nostalgic perspective, his memoirs offer further evidence of the mobilization and unification of the black community during the transitional period.

In his first description of Clarksdale, Lomax points to the thriving urban environment that was Clarksdale at the time of the project. Through his research he discovered that “in 1937 [the city witnessed] a total business of $13,000,000.”\footnote{Lomax 28.} Lomax continued his description, commenting on the “shady lawns” of the town houses, and the “pleasant” personality of the town. It is this type of romantic language that has caused historians to question the credibility of the source. However, by navigating around the romanticized language, Lomax’s memoirs demonstrate the city’s thriving economic status. In 1941, just four years later the population of Clarksdale numbered 12,000 people. When converted into modern currency, these 12,000 people commanded an industry worth $169 million.\footnote{Szwed 140.}

While his memoirs add further evidence of the Delta’s mobility and urbanization, they also underscore his fantastic perspective of blues amplified over time. In one section where Lomax focuses on children’s songs, he juxtaposes the Delta’s version of a traditional children’s song “Needle Eye” to the original, a folk song that originated in Great Britain. In his comparison of the two versions, Lomax stresses the sexuality of the Delta’s song. In the lines leading up to songs he writes, “Willowy girls, just moving into womanhood and as graceful as gazelles, usually led the games.”\footnote{Lomax 86.} Following this eroticized description of the young girls he places

\begin{quote}
Lomax 86.
\end{quote}
headers above the two versions, reading “The Older White Version” and “The Sexy Mississippi Version.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Older White Version</th>
<th>The Sexy Mississippi Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The needle’s eye that doth supply</td>
<td>Oh, you’re lookin so sweet,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The thread that runs so true,</td>
<td>And you kisses so sweet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There’s many a beau that I’ve let go</td>
<td>The needle’s eye,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I wanted you.</td>
<td>Seconds fly,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With a bow so neat, and a kiss so sweet,</td>
<td>Threads that needle right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have this couple meet.</td>
<td>Through the eye.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though they are versions of the same song, Lomax’s superimposed titles stress his preference for the Delta’s rendition. Coupling this “sexy” song with his depiction of the young girls Lomax underlines what he described as the sexuality of the Delta. The “willowy” young women leading the songs demonstrated to Lomax that sex pervaded blues culture at an early age. Lomax even states that the sexuality was so prevalent, it has caused him to break his normal silence upon the subject, saying this memoir represents the first publication by any Lomax (including his father) to discuss sexuality.  

While his fellow ethnographers also documented blues culture’s more overt sexuality, Lomax’s analysis of this characteristic was ahistorical. Lomax’s description of the sexualized children’s song made sex a characteristic that oozed from the Delta, embedded in Delta black’s at an early age and remaining with them permanently. Lomax embraced the idea of sex within blues culture instead of reading it as a form of pleasure and escape from the socio-economic pressures of the region. To Lomax sex was just a fixture within the community, innate. This example of Lomax’s essentialized Delta also underscores how he perceived the universality of the blues. In the titling of the song Lomax omits the concept of race within the Delta’s song, calling it the Sexy Mississippi Version. This omission highlights glorification of blues as a folk music beyond concepts of race and therefore a music that all Americans could unite under.

101 Lomax 87.
102 Lomax 378.
It is ironic that Lomax’s own notes showed the mobilization and progression he so desired for working class peoples. However, his fantastic conception of the blues prevented him from seeing its realization. Through his desires to discover and collect authentic folk music, Lomax created his own ideas of what that culture contained. Through this limited perspective he could not see how the working class of the early 40s was uniting within the Delta by negotiating with external factors like race and nation. The counterculture of the blues engaged these issues rather than remove its people into some essentialist isolated folk culture.

Assisting Lomax throughout the trip to collect music, conducting interviews and noting the general life of Clarksdale were the Fisk ethnographers. Their testimony about the project was not made public until recently. In 2005 their unfinished manuscripts were finally published as part of a collection known as *The Lost Delta Found*. These ethnographers represented the overlooked perspective of the black middle class. Their interactions with Lomax and the musicians nuance the general findings and demonstrate a separation within the black community during the 40s.
SECTION III

Black Outsiders in Blue Country: The Fisk Ethnographers

On August 16, 1941, Fisk sociologist Lewis Wade Jones arrived alone in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Following the arrangements of the spring meetings between Lomax and the Fisk representatives a few months earlier Jones had agreed to do the preliminary research deemed necessary for the project’s success. During his two weeks alone in the Delta, Jones explored Clarksdale and its surrounding plantations, assessing the Delta’s cultural landscape and possible music leads for his colleagues to investigate upon their arrival. Finally on August 29, 1941, musicologist John W. Work, Alan Lomax and Lomax’s wife Elizabeth arrived in the Delta to record and build upon Jones’ initial findings. During the trip the team would grow to include other members. New assistants would come and go from Fisk and the Library; however, Lomax, Jones, and Work would remain as the primary core of the project’s team. Over the next week, the team would record and document the Delta, reconvening a year later in Clarksdale to continue their summertime project. As professional academics, their research took a much more traditional approach to the ethnographic project than the folklorist Lomax, embedding their conclusions in rigorous scholarly research. While their approach to the project appeared more objective than Lomax’s, it was equally political. Where Lomax approached the project hoping to find a music that could unify the working class peoples, the Fisk ethnographers looked other means of unification under race. Their research and study of rural black culture demonstrated an attempt by middle class blacks to valorize working class culture as part of the American canon of music. By canonizing working class black culture within the bounds of American culture rather than just black, they could simplify their ultimate goal of assimilating the entirety of black

103 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 8).
104 Lost Delta Found 13.
culture into the American mainstream. This melding of black culture into the national culture of America would alleviate social pressures on all blacks including the middle and working classes by redefining and encompassing these individuals within the national mainstream rather than the racial other.

The Patriarch: Charles S. Johnson

Fisk University first opened in 1866 as an institution created to educate the freed slave population. By 1940, the university had established itself as a prestigious institution amongst the black community. Situated in west Nashville, the university provided higher-level education to blacks; and as a black institution, the college emphasized black heritage and black studies exemplified by their professors like Dr. Charles S. Johnson who served on boards like the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching. Paradoxically, the institution’s interests in black education and black study fostered a social division between its scholars and its working class origins. By the 1940s the university pooled its student and faculty base from middle class blacks as working class blacks did not have the basic education or the funds to attend Fisk. The 1940s black middle class traditionally held more conservative ideals in contrast to the black working class, and the Fisk ethnographers were no exception. Under the direction of Dr. Johnson, they perceived the progression of the black community through assimilation into the American mainstream rather than through the creation of a counter culture.

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106 Lost Delta Found 2
108 Woods 36.
109 Titon 17.
A member of the Fisk sociology department, Johnson specialized in the study of rural black America commonly referred to as America’s Black belt. He was the author of two books on rural black culture including the work *Shadow of the Plantation*, first published in 1934 where he studied the relationship between the cotton economy and rural black sharecroppers in Alabama. Similar to Lomax, Johnson’s book stressed the pattern of open sexual relations and their ramifications on the family structure within the community. When commenting on the frequency of children born out of wedlock and the general promiscuity within the community he stated, “There is, in a sense, no such thing as illegitimacy in this community.” Some historians like Jeff Todd Titon perceived these comments to hold elitist undertones, as the actions of the rural blacks reflected a social structure that rejected traditional Christian values to which he ascribed. However, Johnson’s conclusion attributed these differing social values to external pressures founded in slavery and continued by the new plantation systems, chastising the historical precedent, not its victims. Where Lomax reached his conclusions on the Delta’s sexuality through his perception of the folk fantasy, Johnson reached his conclusions via strict ethnographic studies. Through his studies Johnson perceived this “illegitimacy” of the black community not as an issue of culture, but of social progression for blacks in America. He wrote, “There are persistent social blocs which for one reason or the other defy prompt incorporation into the approved general pattern.” As highlighted by many historians like Matthew W. Dunne, Johnson’s ultimate goal was for the assimilation of black culture into the American mainstream as it would be beneficial to blacks as a whole. Where Lomax’s memoirs and political actions

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110 Szwed 176.
112 Titon 17.
113 Johnson 6.
114 Dunne 28.
highlighted his desire to revolutionize the image of America to embrace the working class, Johnson’s work demonstrated his perception that black culture would benefit best from a “prompt incorporation into the approved general pattern.”

While blues culture may have represented one idea of unifying American blacks through counter culture like the open communal family structure, Johnson’s works demonstrate a second radically different approach to black progression at Fisk, in a region only a hundred miles north of the Delta. Despite his absence from the actual fieldwork within the Fisk project, in 1941, Johnson was a senior member of Fisk’s staff (actually becoming its first black president in 1946), and a major influence on Lomax’s three Fisk colleagues.115 His sociological works rooted in meticulous anthropologic study would set the standard for the Fisk ethnographers, as their fieldwork demonstrated a more methodical approach than the folklorist Lomax.

The Music Man: John W. Work

Once all the members of the team had arrived in the Delta by late August of 1941, recording commenced.116 Lomax and John Work would travel together and handle all of the recordings done within the first week of the trip. From August 29th through September 5th, the pair would make over twelve hours of preliminary recordings covering blues music, gospels, and sermons.117 At the age of forty, Work was fourteen years senior to Alan Lomax. However, Lomax’s position at the Library of Congress gave him leverage over Work as he controlled the recording machinery and the funding. This would cause tensions between the two men as Work’s strict musicological approach clashed with Lomax’s middle man agenda.118

115 Dunne 3.
116 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 8).
117 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 1).
118 Szwed 193.
Prior to his inclusion in the Fisk trip John W. Work was a vocal student at both the Institute of Musical Art (now Julliard) and Yale.\textsuperscript{119} He returned to Nashville to fill his late father's vacated role as a professor of music and director of Fisk's world famous Jubilee Singers.\textsuperscript{120} At Fisk, Work taught and directed undergraduates in addition to collecting regional folk music for the college's archives.\textsuperscript{121} He embodied a very similar role to Lomax as a folk collector, but his background in classical theory gave his research a much different perspective than his Library counterpart. Despite their differences Work would assist Lomax in almost all of the '41 recordings, sometimes conducting his own interviews with the musicians, one example being the Waters '41 interview.

During the Waters interview John Work's questions acted as the scholarly counter to Lomax's perpetuation of the blues. In his small portion of the interview with Waters, Work asked the performer basic questions about the music scene. He asked Waters about the music played at local dances and which genre he preferred to perform. Waters responded that people danced to blues and other songs like love ballads and he "liked the blues the best."\textsuperscript{122} Where Lomax's initial questions drove at the "facts" of blues, they did not show how it actually functioned in Delta society. Through these questions, Work showed that blues was a real social entity of the working class, existing in communal spaces and as a popular form of music. Following Work's lead, Lomax ended the interview asking Waters about his different techniques and his knowledge of music theory as opposed to more questions on the essence of blues.

Like Lomax, Work's other duties to Fisk kept him away from the Delta for the winter and spring months. Upon the restart of the musical portion of the project in July, the relationship

\textsuperscript{119} Lost Delta Found 3.
\textsuperscript{120} Lost Delta Found 3.
\textsuperscript{122} AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770.
between Work and Lomax had deteriorated greatly. During the little over a month of fieldwork in '42, Work only attended for only one week.\textsuperscript{123} According to Lomax's biographer John Szwed the "professional jealousy" between Lomax and Work made it very hard for them to work together and resulted in Work leaving the project earlier than expected. Muddy Waters' biographer Robert Gordon offered a contrasting opinion, citing Lomax as the antagonist due to his usurpation of power within the project. However, the more logical reason behind their poor relations was a combination of their politics and professional interests.\textsuperscript{124}

Despite his reduced involvement within the project in the summer of '42, Work remained a dedicated member. Following the conclusion of fieldwork, the Library and Fisk placed the project on hold due to the constraints of WWII as some of the members were called into service. Also their two respective leaders could no longer work together. On October 27, 1942 Lomax's successor Ben Botkin wrote to department head Harold Spivacke that, "The deadlock that exists between John W. Work and Alan Lomax should be broken by relieving both of them of any administrative responsibility for the completion of the study."\textsuperscript{125} But this deadlock did not stop Work from pushing forward on a solo publication. Understanding the shortcomings of his specialty, Work had Lewis Jones write the introduction outlining the cultural history of the Delta, affording him the foundation to explore the Delta's music.

In his manuscript Work divides the Delta's music into two basic categories, sacred and secular music. Within the sacred section, Work highlighted the trends of change within church music which paralleled the social changes of the Delta. When describing the preference for newer hymns performed in the Delta's Baptist churches, Work wrote:

\textsuperscript{123} Lost Delta Found 23.
\textsuperscript{124} Gioia 194.
\textsuperscript{125} AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 10).
"The fading-out of the spirituals from an active place in the folk-church, deplorable as it might be to the rest of the country, is simply explained. They are being displaced by types of songs which perform their functions more satisfactorily and more easily."\textsuperscript{126}

While the church openly denounced the blues, the changes made within its musical repertoire demonstrate that like blues, church music was evolving through social interaction. "The fading-out the spirituals" showed that the church understood that the urbanizing community demanded reforms to reflect their steps towards modernity. In order to keep hold of their congregation pastors needed to succumb to the demands of the changing Delta, modernizing their sermons to keep up with the new pace of urban life.

Similar to his investigation of sacred music, Work's analysis of secular music showed similar signs of modernization. Based on his research he wrote, "There are no formal dance halls, and public dancing is limited to that in a few restaurants that provide dancing space...On Saturday they literally swarm. Dancing ranging from the vigorous 'jitterbugging' down to more vulgar types may be observed in these places."\textsuperscript{127} Fist, this commentary underlines Work's personal aversion to blues fostered by his middle class background. The lack of "formal dance halls" and his description of the youth dances as "vulgar" illustrate his personal aversion to blues culture. Despite his own opinions on the blues, his research further illustrated how blues functioned within modernizing Clarksdale. The public swarming to dance halls underscores both the popularity of the music, and the importance of music as a social event. Secondly, Work's manuscript reveals the knowledge of pop culture outside of their region. The jitterbug was a form of swing dancing normally associated with the east coast's big band jazz. Work's documentation of its performance highlighted the open communication between the Delta and other parts of

\textsuperscript{126} Lost Delta Found 58
\textsuperscript{127} Lost Delta Found 84.
America. The jitterbug is evidence of how the 1940s Delta was not the isolated frontier space of Alan Lomax’s memoirs, but instead a region in dialogue with the rest of the country.\footnote{Lomax 216.}

Within his section on secular music, Work included extensive transcriptions of the music in addition to his social analysis. At Fisk University, Work directed the world famous Jubilee Singers. These performers were known for their performances of black spirituals, music bred from the working classes. By bringing this music into the setting of a college choir, where it was performed in formal settings and studied analytically, Fisk musicologists like Work had valorized it as a part of the American canon of music. His transcriptions and analysis of blues music followed similar lines, attempting to incorporate the music into not just the black canon of music, but the American canon. In doing so, he could protect the music’s historical and cultural value, while simultaneously assimilating blues culture into Johnson’s general pattern.

The Realist: Lewis Wade Jones

While recording preoccupied Lomax and Work, Lewis Jones continued his research of the region’s social intricacies. At the age of thirty-one Jones was already an accomplished field research. Within the Fisk project, Jones completely immersed himself in Delta culture, frequenting juke joints and clubs, and even picking cotton alongside day laborers.\footnote{Lost Delta Found 16.} Following Lomax’s guidelines in the project’s mission statement, Jones also interviewed many community elders like S.L. Mangham, a local bank teller, as a means of finding a history to which their contemporary research could compare.\footnote{AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 6).} Through his sociological focus throughout the trip, Jones showed the greatest understanding of the social progression by the Delta’s working class displayed within blues culture.
In his unpublished manuscript, Jones focused on reporting the Delta’s agrarian history alongside the steps toward modernization he witnessed in his field work. According to his field notes, “On Saturday the people who live and work in the cotton fields fill the streets of the ‘New World’ in Clarksdale, or they mill in and out of the stores in Jonestown, Friars Point, and Lila, or they crowd the commissaries at Hopson, Stovall, Sherard, or one of the other plantations. At night, on Saturday, there may be dancing at Mrs. Baugh’s, or Stovall’s, or at New Africa. Every Sunday there is a church meeting within walking distance of the houses.” Continuing his description Jones goes on to mention how the city emptied during the week as people returned to the plantations for work. The consistent ebb and flow of people to and from Clarksdale illustrated its importance within the community beyond its status as an economic hub. The city evolved into the leisure capital of Coahoma County, and this was not just the case in Clarksdale, but as Jones mentions also in the smaller towns of the region like Jonestown and Friars Point. Jones’ research highlighted that while people migrated out of the Delta to cities like Chicago and Detroit, the people who remained urbanized the Delta. Jones’ manuscript illustrated that the Fisk team captioned the Delta as it progressed from an isolated agrarian society into a bustling urban environment.

While the region showed signs of growth, Jones uncovered other evidence to support the growing economic strength of Delta blacks that allowed this urbanization. Within his report on the plantation economy of the Delta, Jones recorded an increase in wages for black labor as day labor became scarce due to emigration out of the south. In August of ’41, wages increased from $.75 to $1.50, and finally to $2.00, illustrating the immense dependency of white plantation owners on their local labor force as most plantations had yet to mechanize and immigration.

131 Lost Delta Found 32.
depleted their source of cheap labor.\textsuperscript{132} Jones noted that many plantations employed a mixture of both tractors and oxen to plow fields, underscoring the transitional period of southern agriculture.\textsuperscript{133} As a result of this pressure to mechanize within a failing economy, racial tensions between whites and blacks amplified. These tensions were not limited to Delta blacks. Both Lomax and the Fisk ethnographers felt the wrath of the reactionary southern whites.

In his preliminary field work Lewis Jones alluded to the racial pressures the project members would witness during their time within the Delta. Within one of his initial correspondences with Johnson, Jones discussed the extremity of the racial tensions within the South. Whites depended upon black labor to maintain the fragile economy of the dwindling cotton industry. They maintained their vice grip on black rights within the greater community through the furnishing system and racially charged violence. While blacks held a sense of freedom within blues culture, the region was uniformly segregated along racial lines. Despite their respected stature as scholars and their accompaniment of a white man from the nation's capital, Jones noted the intense hostility whites directed toward the ethnographers. Plantation owners consistently interrupted recordings and local police patrolled the region hassling the men for papers and identification. Police arrested Lomax at one point for simply stepping onto a black woman's porch.\textsuperscript{134} While Lomax was not new to the South, he praised Jones for his complete understanding of the region's racial intricacies. In his memoirs Lomax consistently alludes to his dependency on Jones to avoid complications with local authorities, optimizing the potential of each recording session.\textsuperscript{135} From Jones' studies, the early forties proved to be a tumultuous period for the Delta plantation owners. With the entry into WWII coupled with the already diminishing

\textsuperscript{132} AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07 (1/9) p. 1).
\textsuperscript{133} AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07 (1/9) p.5).
\textsuperscript{134} Szwed 192.
\textsuperscript{135} Lomax 65.
demand for cotton, Delta plantations were losing workers faster than they could mechanize. Instead of improving labor conditions, Jones witnessed that the dying industry chose to use racial violence on any outsiders they believed would usurp their labor pool and the remaining blacks to deter further loss of their labor source.

Despite the overt racism Jones witnessed in the Delta, like Lomax, he witnessed signs of the Delta blacks' effort to join the national war movement. In his field notes, Jones observed victory gardens on several plantation plots. A victory garden was a way for people to show support by growing a vegetable garden for sustenance as the nation rationed food for troops. The appearance of victory gardens in the Delta seemed contradictory as the oppression of southern whites would seemingly deter blacks from feeling connected to the national effort. Instead their appearance bolstered the scene of nationalism witnessed by Lomax. During WWII, government propaganda impressed victory gardens upon citizens as a way of showing national support. These gardens then became a form of social politics as blacks asserted their citizenship without having to enlist. While Jones was the only fulltime sociologist to take part in the fieldwork of the Delta project, he had several graduate assistants to help gather a complete depiction of the Delta. Samuel Adams would be his primary assistant.

The Understudy: Samuel C. Adams, Jr.

As a graduate assistant during the trip, Samuel C. Adams’ testimony often gets overlooked, credit going to the men with established credentials, Work and Jones. However, Adams was the only member of the Fisk team to actually have any of his work on the trip published. At the young age of twenty-one when the trip began, Jones took Adams along as his assistant. For Adams the project offered a chance to work in the field, eventually providing his

136 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 3)
findings for the basis of his thesis project. His manuscript was submitted to the Fisk department of sociology in 1947; the date was later than expected as he was drafted. While Alan Lomax’s romanticized politics may have hindered the research of John Work and Lewis Jones, Adams’ removal from Lomax opened his own studies to explore Jones’ discoveries in greater depth.

An early manuscript included within the Fisk archive reveals Adams’ interest in how blues culture illustrated growing trends of urbanization within rural black populations of the South. In a study of one hundred families, fifty had radios within their household and thirty had subscriptions or access to urban newspapers. But more interestingly, of the one hundred families twenty-eight travelled to Clarksdale once a week and a staggering seventy-two frequented the city three times a week. Also within the footnote, Adams writes, “most all the families frequent movies, the juke joints, [and] special city events.” From this data Adams illustrates a clear trend within rural populations toward creating a central urban culture. Where originally these people may have frequented the city for economic purposes such as selling produce or buying supplies, as shown by the trip, Clarksdale clearly provided luxuries to rural populations. In contrast to Jones’ findings of Clarksdale as a weekend hub for entertainment, this illustrates people frequented the town daily for both work and pleasure. Clarksdale was part of a rapidly urbanizing region.

Adam’s sociological studies also highlighted how urbanization affectively reduced the role of the church in the Delta. He wrote, “The preacher of today does not work out in the field. He offers his ‘spiritual guidance’ only once a month and does this for a sum of money. In brief, he is no longer a symbol of subtle personal control.” This diminished role of the church was filled by blues culture. The removal of the pastor from the fields gave the rural blacks greater

137 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), folder (09.04.07 (4/9) (2/2)).
138 Lost Delta Found 241.
independence within their everyday lives. As the church urbanized following the trends of the
region, this change ironically loosened its grip on its followers as the removal of the pastor from
the residential areas opened its flock choice between the church and the blues. The extreme
popularity of the juke joints and dance halls witnessed by each member of the team accented the
people’s trend toward blues culture. Through his study Adams demonstrated that these people of
the Delta were not a folk people any longer, but through technology and social pressures, they
too were a part of larger trends within the nation of urbanization and liberalization.

Life After the Delta

As the project came to conclusion after the summer trips of 1942, the original concept of
the project was a joint publication of the findings to compliment the recordings housed in the
Library of Congress. However, the parties scrapped the idea of a joint publication due to the
tensions between Lomax, Work, and Jones. Instead Work and Jones continued on in their
positions at Fisk. In Lomax’s biography, John Szwed wrote that Work’s manuscript was sent to
the Library of Congress for approval by Fisk’s president Thomas E. Jones, but the work was
somehow lost or never appeared at the Library due to wartime complications. Like Lomax,
WWII would demand the services of Jones and Adams who both served three year spells in the
Army. Jones would work in the Office of War Information while Adams enlisted as a private.
Due to his age, Work was not called into service and continued on as a professor at Fisk, where
he remained until he died in 1967. After the war, Jones returned to Fisk and a career in academia,
and eventually joined the department of sociology at Tuskegee Institute School of Education.

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139 Szwed 194.
140 Lost Delta Found 15.
Adams would go on to have a career in “public service” and became the U.S. ambassador to Niger from ’68 to ’69.\textsuperscript{141}

Within the Fisk project, these scholars accentuated the social disparity within the black community during the early 40s. Where his own aspirations for the working class blocked Lomax’s vision of the Delta, the Fisk ethnographers were equally blocked by their perception of class. Their attempts to study and canonize blues culture echoed their effort to initiate the assimilation of blues culture into the American mainstream. Their efforts to induce assimilation highlighted the fear that black culture could not stand alone within American society instead needing to assimilate in order to ensure black progression. However, the blues musicians would demonstrate that the working class counterculture of the blues could navigate and negotiate its own relationship with the social issues of the region and nation.

\textsuperscript{141}Lost Delta Found 17.
SECTION IV

Voicing the People: The Delta Blues Musicians of the Fisk Project

In 1941, when Alan Lomax and the Fisk team entered Clarksdale, they entered a rural black culture deeply rooted in musical traditions. They found music in the fields, on the streets, in the levee camps, in every church and especially in the night clubs. In the fields, levee camps, and chain gangs, work songs helped to coordinate labor and distract from the taxing physical demands. In the church, hymns helped pastors transition their sermons as well as encourage participation. In the night clubs, music was the main source of entertainment. According to S.L. Mangham, an elder Delta native, essentially everyone in the Delta knew how to play an instrument of some sort. From its musical traditions the Delta produced performers like Bessie Smith who received national stardom by singing at clubs in New Orleans and New York City during the twenties. The Delta’s blues performers like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Tommy Johnson, and Charley Patton also found a period of regional popularity at the end of the twenties and into the early thirties. But by the time of the Fisk project, the Delta was embracing new technologies like radios and jukeboxes introducing the region to new musical influences outside of the region. In the Delta, music was the regional form of internalizing and managing socio-political pressures and change.

Highway Generation Blues: Muddy Waters

McKinley Morganfield was born on April 4, 1913 near the Cottonwood Plantation outside of Clarksdale. Soon after his birth Morganfield moved to the Stovall Plantation where

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142 Lost Delta Found 97.
143 Lost Delta Found 58.
144 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 6).
145 Gioia 203.
he would live until his late twenties, spending his entire youth in the Clarksdale region, living first on his family's plot then moving to his own. From childhood on, Morganfield worked primarily as a sharecropper. While his profession was not at all unusual to the region or period, he set himself apart from other sharecroppers by other means. By the late 30s and early 40s, Morganfield obtained the position of manager at Stovall's local juke joint where he also made and sold bootleg whiskey. In addition to his duties on the plantation, Morganfield developed a local reputation as a bluesman. He performed at the Stovall juke joint as well as at fish fries and local dances. In the summer of 1941, recording under his pseudonym Muddy Waters, Morganfield would be the first blues musician recorded by Alan Lomax and John W. Work as part of the Fisk project.

Following leads from Lewis Jones's preliminary fieldwork, Alan Lomax and John Work arrived in Stovall on August 31, 1941, a Sunday. Jones had uncovered Waters' name as a popular local bluesman following his own work picking cotton in the fields. After introducing himself as "Stovall's famous guitar picker," he performed a slow-tempo blues number entitled "Country Blues." He sung in the fourth verse:

Yes, minutes seem like hours and hours seem like days
Seems like my baby would stop her, her lowdown ways, hey
Minutes seem like hours child, and hours seem like days
Yes, seem like my woman now, well gal, she might stop her lowdown ways

When Lomax inquired about the song's inspiration Waters replied, "Well, I just felt blue, an' the song came into my mind an' come to me just like that song and I start to singin' an' went on."

As the conversation continued Waters informed the ethnographers that "Country Blues" was

146 Gordon xiii.
147 Gioia 205.
148 Gordon 38.
149 Lost Delta Found 16.
150 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770a1.
actually his own interpretation and rearrangement of Robert Johnson’s “Walking Blues.”

Johnson was a fellow bluesman from the Delta who reached monumental fame posthumously through his recordings and personal myth.\(^{151}\) Though he never actually met Johnson, Waters did study under Johnson’s mentor Eddie “Son” House who also hailed from the Delta. While Johnson’s song “Walking Blues” was broadcast on radio stations around the South, Waters actually learned the song prior to ever hearing it on any radio programming.\(^{152}\) In his research of the Waters performance, musicologist John Cowley discovered that Waters’ Country Blues and Johnson’s Walking Blues both had derivative qualities of their mentor Son House’s tune “My Black Mama.”\(^{153}\) Where Lomax noted that he believed Waters may have plagiarized Johnson’s tune, the likeness of these songs illustrates the greater concept of oral traditions and communal ownership within the blues community.\(^{154}\) The likeness of the three songs accents the master-apprentice relationship between generations as the younger blues players mimicked and borrowed from the older generations. In this manner, blues was part of an oral tradition, being passed on in a direct linear fashion. This open relationship between blues players mirrored the open familial relationship as of the Delta, as the older generations collectively looked after the younger ones. The blues was a cross generational phenomenon, connecting the river, railroad, and highway generations through a single musical movement, creating a lineage between generations through the blues.

While Lomax believed Waters to be an excellent example of his purified conception of the blues, Waters’ music actually reflected an intimate knowledge of the pop music Lomax deemed unimportant. In his analysis of Waters’ music John Szwed wrote, “As Muddy Waters’

\(^{152}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770a1.
\(^{153}\) Cowley 60.
\(^{154}\) Cowley 62.
own taste revealed, these rural people were already wired into national popular culture, though they still filtered it through their own aesthetic. ¹⁵⁵ Unlike most blues songs that follow a traditional AAB pattern within the lyrics and chord changes, Waters’ “Country Blues” follows an ABAB pattern, a standard pop form. Sometimes within his lyrics he mixes these patterns by varying the line length or content in an ABA¹B¹. ¹⁵⁶ Waters’ music represented a unique form of blues that adopted pop techniques, paralleling the social on goings within the Delta’s community as a whole. Waters’ style indicated that authenticity lay more in the experience than the musical form that Lomax adhered to. The musician’s freedom to change and alter form, or mimic his past generations showed that there was no real conscription within blues to any regional guidelines by his incorporation of pop music. In his field notes, Lewis Jones included a list of the songs available in the jukeboxes at the local clubs. In the few examples, the majority of songs fall into the category of big band jazz, the most popular dance music of the time. The lists included names like Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and Bing Crosby. The only blues song included on any of these lists was Memphis Slim’s “Beer Drinking Woman.” As the manager and performer at local juke joints, Waters was certainly aware of the demands of the local public. Waters’ music demonstrated an internalization of national culture into blues culture. Though Lomax saw the music as a purified folk culture, that folk culture was already negotiating its own relationship with the American mainstream.

The conversation between Waters and Lomax finally ended discussing issues of practice and technique. When Lomax asked how much he practiced to reach his skill level, he answered assertively, “An hour and a half to two hours. Everyday.”¹⁵⁷ Waters concludes the conversation relaying his knowledge of techniques “Spanish tuning,” “straight e,” “cross-note tuning” and his

¹⁵⁵ Szwed 183.
¹⁵⁶ Szwed 182.
¹⁵⁷ AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770a1.
bottleneck slide. While many myths have been told about blues musicians, or even started by the musicians themselves, the Waters interview demonstrated how bluesmen maintained a tradition of musical professionalism. The most common myth about the Delta blues is that of Robert Johnson's journey one night to the crossroads where he met the devil. In exchange for his soul, Johnson received unparalleled virtuosic guitar skills. While the myth doubles as entertainment, it detracts from the effort and time put in to mastering blues performance. Waters' statement that he practiced for up to two hours daily highlights the dedication of these musicians, similar to any classically trained musicians of a professional symphony, dispelling any racialized concepts of the innate musicality of black people. The continual practice of these players developed innovative new techniques to guitar playing demonstrated throughout Waters' song. The use of the bottleneck, a technique he learned from Son House, causes the strings of a guitar to resonate with greater vibrations, amplifying the sound while also making the transitions between notes smoother. Waters also uses the famed blue notes within his song, achieved by bending the strings to capture sounds in between the dynamic register of the instrument. The combination of all of these techniques allows the guitar to sing like the human voice. As a result, the guitar line acts as a second voice constantly underpinning the satire of the vocal lines with its blue tones. One example of this social satire within blues was Waters' last song recorded in the 1941 sessions, "Burr Clover Farm Blues."

Well now, the reason that I love that old burr clover farm so well
Well now, the reason that I love that old burr clover farm so well
Well now, we always have money and we never raise no hell

Well now, I'm leaving this morning, and I sure do hate to go
Well now, I'm leaving this morning, and I sure do hate to go
Well now, I've got to leave this burr clover farm, I ain't coming back no more

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158 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4770a1.
Coupling the lyrics of the song with the economic backdrop provided by Lewis Jones highlights how Waters utilized song to mock the furnishing system and its abuse of black labor. If read out of context, the lyrics could be mistaken for sincerity, but Waters' tone and the musical accompaniment ensure the listener understands the satire within the song. Blues was a way of speaking out against the oppression indirectly through personal ballads, but more importantly it was a way of unifying the culture against that oppression, creating a social chorus of irony.

While Lomax and Work fully intended to return to the Delta the next summer to expand upon their recordings, other projects and duties like lecturing and recording in other regions pulled them away from the Delta. During the project's fall and winter lay-by season, Waters wrote to Lomax inquiring about whether his recordings had gained any popularity in Washington and about receiving a few records for his own use. His first letter arrived in D.C. a little over a month after the initial recordings. On September 21, 1941, Waters wrote:

This is the boy that put out Burr Clover Blues... and several more blues. Want to know did they take. Please sir if they did please send some to Clarksdale, Miss. [Please] answer soon to M.C. Morganfield and Son Simms. [sic]

This letter illustrated Waters desire and hunger to pursue his musical aspirations. His use of the term "boy" demonstrated his caution not to offend Lomax, using the appropriate southern etiquette for a black man reference himself in the presence of whites. The term "take" was a colloquial way of asking about the music's popularity in D.C. Waters' interest in his music's popularity illustrated his understanding that the project might assist his musical career, taking it from a regional success to a national success. However, due to his responsibilities at the Library of Congress and the introduction of America into WWII it would take awhile for Lomax to respond. Where the music was his escape within the Delta, Waters' letter showed how he interpreted the blues as a product that could provide as his potential escape from the Delta.

159 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11).
Lomax would finally respond in January, writing that he would send Waters several copies of the recordings as soon as possible.\(^{160}\) In March of ’42 Lomax asked Waters’ permission to use his songs as part of a folk compilation album.\(^{161}\) The album was intended to be part of a demonstration to “Latin American countries” of the folk peoples of the United States. Waters would receive twenty dollars pay from the Library for allowing his songs to be used as a part of U.S. diplomacy and also receive four copies of the record. He however would not receive any other royalties as the record was for “non-commercial use only.”\(^{162}\) While Waters agreed to have his music added to the compilation, further controversy came from his lack of immediate payment. Waters was concerned that he did not receive immediate payment, to which Lomax had to explain via a letter that the payment was coming, but would be slow due to the intensified bureaucracy of during the first year of war.\(^{163}\) Waters finally received his payment, nine months later and four months after the Fisk project had ostensibly ended.

Despite the government cracking down on funding, Lomax returned to the Delta in the summer of ’42 as originally intended. He arrived in Clarksdale in late June to broaden the collection he and Work began the previous summer. On July 24, Lomax returned to the Stovall Plantation in order to record more songs with Waters. This time Waters would play with the Son Simms Four, a full Dixie ensemble, including violin, guitar, mandolin, and harmonica.\(^{164}\) The group gave Lomax twelve new tracks for the archives. Waters’ ability to perform as a solo artist and within an ensemble accented the versatility of the Delta blues. The 1942 performance countered Lomax’s purified belief that Delta blues existed as a solo performance, a single

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\(^{160}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11).
\(^{161}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11).
\(^{162}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11).
\(^{163}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11).
\(^{164}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 6628.
crooner and his guitar. Instead it was communal activity, allowing audiences to participate as well as other musicians, further bonding the community together within blues culture.

Following the Fisk recordings, Waters would take his talents and move north like many Delta blacks in search of new industrial labor outside of the oppressive plantation system. Waters’ migration was part of a larger movement within the South inspired by WWII as the northern factories demanded more labor. Like his protégé, Son House would similarly move north during the war period, but not before he made his own contribution to Lomax’s extensive archive.

The Railroad Mentor: Son House

As the first trip into the Delta was intended as a prelude to a larger field study, Waters was just the first stop of many. However, his interview gave Lomax and Work a new subject to track down, Son House. Like Waters, House was born on a plantation outside of Clarksdale in 1902 (House himself also claimed to have been born in 1886, which would have made him 102 at his death in 1988).\footnote{Gioia 79.} A bluesman from the railroad generation of the ’30s, the Delta blues’ most lucrative period, House recorded a number of singles for Paramount Records as the record label tried to cash in on the race record market. However, his records saw little success compared to his contemporaries like Charley Patton, a popular performer House toured alongside. As a result of his minimal income as a performer, he would spend most of his life working on plantations. Like Waters, House also had other occupations to couple with his field work. Following a stint in the Delta’s Parchman Farm Penitentiary for a crime thought to be murder, House would spend several years as a preacher, repenting for his sins as a blues performer.\footnote{David Dicaire. \textit{Blues Singers}. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1999) 11.} He was not the first nor the last Delta blue player housed in Parchman, as the prison housed anyone
charged from minor misdemeanors to murder. It was said by many inmates that the Parchman Farm chain gang was “worse than slavery.”¹⁶⁷ In order to avoid the chain gang, some inmates would “knock a Joe,” and literally maim themselves with their work tools.¹⁶⁸ But following his time at Parchman, he would return to the blues by mentoring the likes of Robert Johnson and Waters in addition to his sharecropping duties. In an interview reflecting on his career, Waters said that in the beginning of his career, “I had been learning guitar from this Scott Bowhandle [unknown blues player]. But then I saw Son House play and I realized he [Bowhandle] couldn’t play nothing at all.”¹⁶⁹ In early September, 1941, Alan Lomax and John Work travelled to House’s plantation plot to record the blues master based on the tips of his protégé Waters.

Upon the request of the ethnographers, House performed four songs for the archives. Like all of the Fisk archives, the ethnographers recorded House on location at his home, a small plantation shanty. Both Work and Adams mentioned the tensions between the church and the blues in their manuscripts as pastors believed the blues to be a path of sin. One of the steps they took in deterring their flocks from blues culture was to banish the guitar, making it a forbidden instrument.¹⁷⁰ The reasoning behind this banishment was that the guitar was mobile instrument. This concept of individual mobility radiates from House’s “Shetland Pony Blues.” During the bridge, House’s agile fingers fly over the fret board. Similarly, the lyrics dream of an escape to Mexico. Coincidentally during the recording, a train is audible in the background, passing by so closely that its engine noise overwhelms the recording.¹⁷¹ The church rejected blues because it emphasized mobility, challenging the traditional family structure through individual freedom.

¹⁶⁷ Rogers 19.
¹⁶⁸ Gioia 87.
¹⁶⁹ Cowley 62.
¹⁷⁰ Lost Delta Found 56.
¹⁷¹ AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 4780b.
In the months following the summer recordings House, like Waters, inquired about obtaining a few copies that he could then share with his family members. In October he wrote:

Dear Mr. alan Lomax I received your Letter and realy appreciated your writting me about those records we made Listen Mr. Lomax since those records will not Be published I would Be glad for you record one or two of them and Send me I would Like very will To my Sister and Brother one if Eve I would have to pay for them I would Like to have them one I and Leroy William made with guitar and harp So answer Soon

your Truly
Son House [sic]
(Dated 10/30/1941)\(^{172}\)

Unlike Waters’ letter to Lomax which inquired about his music’s popularity, House appeared more practical in his expectations of the project’s fruits. His earlier experience in the music industry exposed him to its fickle nature, reflected in his approach to obtaining the records. The stresses within the phrases “Listen Mr. Lomax” and “So answer soon,” underlined House’s assertion of power within the relationship between himself and Lomax. While his letter remains cordial, parallel to his blues it holds subtle undertones of authority, demanding copies of the records for his family. This subtle display of power within the letter accents how House understood the small amount of power that the trip allotted him, manipulating his relationship with Lomax to gain some reasonable profit from his efforts. Where this letter shows the bluesman’s savvy, it also accented his sense of accountability to his fellow musicians. While House and Waters were both the proverbial stars within their sessions, their letters both included their sidemen, crediting their fellow musicians. This sense of camaraderie within blues culture countered the cutthroat aspects of the music industry. This fraternity within the blues resembled a labor union between musicians as they promoted unity rather than the success of the individual.

\(^{172}\) AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), (folder 11). Despite the lack of punctuation and inconsistent capitalization, Son House interestingly showed remarkable penmanship. Ironically, in comparison to Lomax’s handwriting, it would seem that House held the college degree.
In response to House’s requests, Lomax would send several copies of the recordings back to the Delta, but unlike in his correspondence with Waters, Lomax would respond almost instantaneously. Lomax’s prompt response was due to his interest in bringing House out of the Delta and making him part of a folk tour. Lomax and his father had had some previous success bringing folk singers to the East to perform as a way of popularizing folk and generating funding. Lomax perceived House as an elder statesman of the blues, the source for other greats like Robert Johnson and Waters, therefore making him the best candidate to bring to Washington and New York as a diplomat of the folk and the working class man. Throughout the correspondence, House remained polite, but wary. His letters showed great interest in performing, but he consistently told Lomax that without assisted funding for travel, he could not make it to New York. He understood that the cost of travelling to New York would most likely outweigh his payment for his performances. Despite the failure to bring House out of his quasi-retirement, Lomax would reunite with House in the summer of ’42 when he returned with Lewis Jones to Clarksdale.

On July 17, 1942, Lomax would return to House’s plantation abode to continue where he left off during the previous summer. In his second session, House would perform seven original tracks including the songs “The Pony Blues,” “Country Farm Blues,” “Death Letter Blues” and most interestingly “American Defense.” House’s song “American Defense” offers a contemporary critique of the nation at war. Where Lomax’s interest in the Delta came from its folk allure, House’s song underscored that the folk culture of the Delta was well aware of national issues and how those issues might affect their town and themselves. House’s song opens with the chorus writing, “Not used to sitting in no tent/ Not used to having no fears/ This war may last you for years.” The last line within the chorus conveys an understanding that despite any

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173 AFC Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (1941/002), tape 6607b3.
propaganda of a swift defeat of the Axis powers, the war would most likely last much longer, and the “fear” of war much longer than that. The first verse of the song then dives into the struggles of war within the homeland, discussing the need to ration and “raise more produce.” The last line “so save all your worries in toils” smartly accents that the most productive action of civilians was to lose themselves in their work for the war effort. In the next verse House twists his analysis of the civilian effort to reflect that though it was a nation at war, the nation was internally divided. Where Lomax and Jones witnessed Delta blacks joining in the war effort, House vocalized how these people were still considered secondary citizens. He sang, “Well the red, white, and blue/ That represents you/ You ought to do everything you can.” Here his lyrics make heavy demands of the proverbial citizen, the average American. But the use of “you” instead of ‘me’ highlights that not all blacks felt that they were part of the nation. He even goes on to state that “gentle Mac Arth is not a friend,” an outright statement against America’s leading general in the Pacific theatre. His final line of “don’t let this worry you” holds the classic undertones of the blues double entendre, mocking the positive rallying efforts of the government. Ironically, this song would make it into war compilations like Kickin’ Hitler’s Butt, sent around the nation and to troops as part of American propaganda.

Like Waters, House too would leave the Delta. Ironically, he would relocate to Rochester, New York, the state he could not afford to reach a year earlier. Unlike Waters, House did not seek to further his musical career in the North; instead he worked as a day laborer in various trades. But despite his seclusion from the music world, House would make a resurgence during the blues revivals of the 60s. He would tour around America performing at various blues festivals. In his later life he moved to Detroit where he finally died in 1988.
Where Lomax and the ethnographers’ perspectives are of great value to understanding the Delta during this period of transition, they represent outside commentary on blues culture. These performers represented primary perspectives on the true state of black unity within the South. The social commentary within their songs illustrated that despite the concepts of mobility, urbanization, and even national sentiment seen by the ethnographers, blacks had many issues still to resolve both internally and externally to ensure the progression of blacks as a whole within America. Their relationship to Lomax demonstrated how blues could act as a vehicle for success or a personal defense. Waters viewed the project as a way of potentially escaping the Delta through musical success, while House’s wariness demonstrated how blues men could hide behind their satire, pushing their own politics through the lyrics, or retreating behind them when necessary.
CONCLUSION

Blues Moving Forward

After leaving the Delta, Waters moved north to Chicago, along with many southern workers as part of "the largest internal migration in U.S. history." Leading a similar life to his days on the southern plantation, he worked as day laborer, playing music on the side. While he found sympathetic audiences in the black community for his southern styles, his desire to become a mainstream artist pushed him to alter his style, creating a new form of blues aptly named Chicago blues based on its place of birth. This new style combined the gritty, blue sounds of the Delta with electric sounds of the industrial city. The Chess brothers, owners of Chess records, signed Waters due to his local popularity after he toured Chicago with another Delta native Big Bill Broonzy. Following his two singles "Rollin' Stone" in 1947 and "Hoochie Coochie Man" in 1954, Waters got his satisfaction, becoming a nationally recognized star.

As the Chicago blues grew in popularity, people naturally inquired about its origins within the Delta. In an interview, a reporter asked Waters about his current relationship to the region that founded his musical career. When asked if he would return to the Delta, Waters responded, "I wanted to get out of Mississippi in the worst way, man. Go back? What I want to go back for?" Waters' unabashed retort to the reporter demonstrated that despite the signs of progression within the Delta witnessed by the Fisk ethnographers, the region still maintained serious socio-political issues. Where the blues had fostered a new counter culture within the region through mobility and urbanization, this modernizing community was not yet strong enough to truly challenge the status quo of racial oppression. The divisions within the working class between the liberal blues culture and the conservative church still fragmented the

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174 Denning 467.
175 Filene 77.
176 Cobb 284.
unification of Delta blacks. During the early 40s, blues culture could provide internal solace for the black community, but did not yet have the power to push black agendas outside of the black community. As a result, migration out of the Delta continued.

Despite the continuous migration out of the Delta, the Fisk project still proved vital to understanding the origins of the budding cultures like the Chicago blues movement. Waters’ tune from “I Bes Troubled” from the first Fisk recordings accented the blues’ immediate push for individual autonomy. In the third verse he sang:

Yeah, I know somebody, who' been talking to you
I don't need no telling, girl, I can watch the way you do
And I be troubled, I be all worried in mind
Yeah and I'm never bein' satisfied, and I just can't keep from cryin'

The line “I don’t need no telling, girl, I can watch the way you do” showed that the blues did not need any assistance from the popular front or the Fisk academics in validating its music and culture. The ending phrase, “I can watch the way you do” demonstrated Waters’ personal savvy as he could “watch” and learn from his surroundings without the assistance of anyone else’s political agenda. He could make up his own mind about his relationship to the Delta, the black community, and the nation, choosing blues above them all.

According social theorist Amiri Baraka, the blues was and is an affirmation of black culture in America; however, he acknowledged that this did not stop its appeal within the national culture. Despite its racial parameters of exclusivity, the blues would expand beyond black culture and into the American superculture. Through its dark tones, gritty and often sexual lyrics, the blues, gained a great deal of popularity in the post-war years. On this phenomenon, Baraka wrote, “Perhaps what is so apparent in classic blues is the sense for the first time that the negro felt he was a part of that superstructure at all. The lyrics of classic blues become concerned with situations and ideas that are recognizable as having issued from one area of a much larger
human concern.” The “larger human concern” was the representation of the working class within the American identity. This music’s universal overtones could incorporate other marginalized groups to voice change within the nation from its conservative bourgeois focus. Exemplified by performers like Elvis, white listeners picked up on the universal concepts of “human concern” and embraced blues, mapping their own strife onto popular tunes. The integration of blues into American pop culture signified a transformation within the post-war years.

While Michael Denning asserted that World War II caused a halt to the labor movement of the 1930s, blues music represented a continuation of that movement. Denning wrote, “The missed connection between the cultural front and the southern migrants deeply affected the course of post-war American culture. The left never had the impact on the new working-class musics… that it did on the musical cultures of swing and jazz. Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and Frank Sinatra lent their names to Popular Front benefits and alliances; Muddy Waters, Hank Williams, and Elvis Presley never did.” However, as shown by the evidence of the Fisk project, blues culture did not need the benefits of Alan Lomax and the Popular Front to continue its labor movement. While the war certainly did alter the structure of the Delta’s working class, the industrial and popular shifts that accompanied it acted in a positive manner, spreading the blues and its people around the country. With America tuned into the plight of the working class through southern folk music like blues and country, the music could direct the non-working class peoples to the social injustices active within America.

This voice of the laboring class was so strong that it even reached international levels. The new blue characteristics of American culture were so pronounced that musicians within

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177 Jones/Baraka 87.
178 Denning 469-470.
across international borders picked up on their themes of social oppressions. In an interview for Martin Scorsese’s film *Eric Clapton: Nothing but the Blues*, Eric Clapton said, “It was the first, really, that got to me. And it still really is the most important music in my life today, the music of Muddy Waters.” Waters’ music was received so well in Great Britain that Mick Jagger and Keith Richards named their band after Waters’ hit “Rollin’ Stone,” picking up on the blues push for social progression. But all of this success blues gained in the later decades of the 20th century can be reflected back within the moment of the Fisk project.

The Fisk project provided a snapshot of the blues in its transition from a folk music into a national sensation. As displayed by Lomax, the Fisk ethnographers, and the musicians, the 1940s Delta was not an isolated folk culture, but a region engaged with the national discourse of class, race, and war. This moment would prove to be a stepping-stone providing the foundations of the larger national civil rights movement a decade later. It was within the Delta that the black community could create its own voice through a melancholic satire, asserting an agenda of civil reform through its documentation of its personal struggles.

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APPENDIX

Fig. 1

MAP OF THE
Yazoo-Mississippi Valley
SHOWING LINES THEREIN
OF THE
Yazoo and Mississippi Valley
Railroad
AND THE
Illinois Central Railroad.
Fig. 2

Muddy Waters "I Bes Troubled"

Well if I feel tomorrow  
Like I feel today  
I'm gonna pack my suitcase  
And make my getaway  
Chorus:  
Lord I'm troubled, I'm all worried in mind  
And I'm never bein' satisfied,  
And I just can't keep from cryin'

Yeah, I know my little ol' baby  
She gonna jump and shout  
That ol' train be late girl,  
And I come walkin' out  
Chorus

Yeah, I know somebody  
Sho' been talkin' to you  
I don't need no telling, girl  
I can watch the way you do  
Chorus

Yeah, now goodbye baby  
Got no more to say  
Just like I been tellin' you, girl  
You're gonna have to leave my way  
Chorus

Yeah my baby she quit me  
Seem like mama was dead  
I got real worried gal  
And she drove it to my head  
Chorus
Muddy Waters “Country Blues”

I get later on in the evening time, I feel like, like blowing my horn
I woke up this morning, find my, my little baby gone, hmm
Later on in the evening, main man, I feel like, like blowing my horn
Well I, woke up this morning baby, find my little baby gone

A well now, some folks say they worry, worry blues ain't bad
That's a misery feeling child, I most, most ever had
Some folks tell me, man I did worry, the blues ain't bad
Well that's a misery ole feeling, honey now, well gal, I most ever had

Well, brooks run into the ocean, ocean run in, into the sea
If I don't find my baby somebody gonna, gonna bury me, um-hm
Brook run into the ocean, child, ocean run into the sea
Well, if I don't find my baby now, well gal, you gonna have to bury me

Yes, minutes seem like hours and hours seem like days
Seems like my baby would stop her, her lowdown ways, hey
Minutes seem like hours child, and hours seem like days
Yes, seem like my woman now, well gal, she might stop her lowdown ways

[Instrumental break]

Well now I'm, I'm leaving this morning if I had-a, whoa ride the blind
I feel mistreated girl you know now, I don't mind dying
Leaving this morning, tell ya I had-a now ride the blind
Yeah, been mistreated baby now, baby and I don't mind dying
Muddy Waters Burr Clover Farm Blues (1941)

Well now, that clover man way up in Dundee
Well now, that clover man way up in Dundee
Well now, you go down to Mr. Howard Stovall's place, he's got all the burr clover you need

Well now, the reason that I love that old burr clover farm so well
Well now, the reason that I love that old burr clover farm so well
Well now, we always have money and we never raise no hell

Well now, I'm leaving this morning, and I sure do hate to go
Well now, I'm leaving this morning, and I sure do hate to go
Well now, I've got to leave this burr clover farm, I ain't coming back no more

Now, good bye everybody and I may not coming back again
Now, good bye everybody and I may not coming back again
Well now, I've got to leave this burr clover farm, my baby don't want me around

Well, so long, so long, you gonna need my help, I say
Well, so long, so long, you gonna need my help, I say
Well now, I here do wanna sell you some burr clover, honey, just before I go away
Fig. 5

Son House “American Defense”:

Chorus: Not used in sittin in no tent
Not used in having no fears
This war may last you for years

American defense
Well you use some sense
Just have to take care of your boys
you must raise more produce
farmers set sail and use
so save all your worries in toils

Chorus

Well the red white and blue
That represents you
You ought to do everything that you can
Buy a war savin' stamps
You men go to their camps
Be brave and take this pen

Chorus

Oh that troubles sometimes
All upset your mind
Well you all know just what to do
keep pushin, keep shovin'
don't be angry, be loved
be a good, fellow, honest and true

Chorus

You can say yes or no
but we got to win this war
because gentle Mac Arth is not a friend
They won't be enough japs
to shoot a little game of craps
because the biggest of them all will be dead

Chorus

This war sure do bother
our mothers and father
our sister and brothers too
our friends and relations
this war been creation don't let this worry you

Chorus
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