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The Land Where the Blues Began

By John Bishop



Mississippi summers are hot. When you pick up a camera you are instantly drenched with sweat from the exertion. Three thousand watts of quartz light and two hundred people crammed into a little church add to the effect.

It was the first day's shoot and I was nervous; they weren't getting audio in the recording van and already the deacon was starting the revival. My collaborator, folklorist Worth Long, had briefed me on the order of the service and what to expect. I thought over what he said as I waited. The two men in the front row were seekers who expected to accept religion; the preaching, singing, and praying would focus on them. If all went well, they would cross over to the mourner's bench which faced the congregation.

"Tape's rolling." Director Alan Lomax' voice came across the intercom. I swung the Ikegami HL-77 onto my shoulder and looked across the room to Ludwig Goon who would be shooting concurrently with a TKP-45. He smiled and gestured thumbs up as the congregation eased into the galvanizing moan of a lining hymn.

Things moved fast for the next three hours. Alan coordinated the coverage by intercom from the van where he would watch both monitors. Much of the interaction consisted of rapid alternation between song leader and congregation or preacher and congregation, so each camera fed a separate recorder for greatest flexibility in editing. The experience was more intense than I had expected. There was poetry in the songs and sermon, tender community support of the parishioners in trance, and the resolution of an essential conflict of group membership when the two seekers cross over. I was swept into the excitement; the camera became part of me, the heat ceased to be noticeable, and I moved as part of the congregation. This revival service was the start of a month of shooting that would culminate in a one-hour program for PBS, **THE LAND WHERE THE BLUES BEGAN**.

I ached all over the next day. Shooting handheld for three hours with a new camera that weighs twice as much as an Arri takes its toll. But the rushes were a fine liniment: both cameras captured the vitality of the service. Even after watching the action over and over in the editing, I still get chills when the two men “come across”.

The project began six months earlier in New York when Alan Lomax and I discussed making a pilot film on American folk music with representatives of the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television. We agreed that the rich folk culture should be represented on television. Alan has spent much of his life bringing the most modern recording technology to the best folk performers and television as a logical extension of his work. And Mississippi was familiar ground: he'd made periodic trips there since the 1930's and recorded not only blues but African style fife and drum music, work songs, field hollers, and religious music.

Now Alan wanted to concentrate on the black tradition he knew so well. This would also give him the opportunity to do field work with his colleague Worth Long whose on-going research in the south would guide our work. In lieu of committing to a full-blown (ex pensive) pilot film, we decided to spend a month doing research and ENG videotaping, and obtained a small grant from the National Endowment for the Arts Mississippi ETV would provide technical support and hold first option on cooperative post-production. Paula Tadlock would coordinate our relationship with the station, administer the grant, supervise tape dubbing, and otherwise facilitate the project. We were given carte blanche in what we shot and what we did with the footage.

Before going to Mississippi, Alan and I spent many hours looking at folklore films and footage and discussing the style and look we wanted. We agreed on the general guidelines we would follow throughout the shooting. We want our informants to have the visual dignity and stature they deserved as carriers of a cultural tradition. To this end we shot all close-ups from slightly below eye level, and most medium and long shots from relatively low angles to give an heroic quality.

We also wanted to convey the sense of excitement that makes folk performers so important to their own communities. We did not want a delicate and precious preservation of isolated fragments of repertoire as much as a sense of on-going process. For this reason the camera had to move within the subject's interactive orbit, so we tried to shoot relatively close with short focal lengths.

Alan wanted to direct and inter view from a position immediately behind the camera so the informants would relate directly to the audience. (It was

harder to make this work than we expected.)Both by my preference and our shared conviction that the difference between great shots and adequate ones is often a matter of slight changes in camera position, we tried to work handheld as much as possible. It was essential to be flexible because the flow was unpredictable and the material usually not repeatable. We even shot a two-hour interview handheld—an exhausted experience, but surprisingly little footage was marred by camera shake, stumbling, etc.

Alan went to Mississippi ten days before shooting began, and criss-crossed the state with Worth whose extensive recent work provided an excellent foil to Alan's experience. They came up with a list of subjects to cover that would have kept a film crew busy for a year. We did them all and a few more.

Our second shoot contrasted sharply with the excitement and real-life tension of the revival. We taped blues master Jack Owens and his blind harmonica player, Bud Spires, on Jack's front porch out in the middle of a cotton field. The rest of our shooting would alternate between two modes, ongoing events, and controlled interview/performances.

Jack Owens was very skeptical and reticent about the whole proceeding, about the cables snaking across his yard, the microphone hidden on his person, and the abrupt invasion of his quietude. After a few songs, Alan suggested he watch the playback. Instant rushes give video a great advantage over film in working with folklore subjects. Ikegami colorimetry translated through a Trinitron monitor is hard to beat, and Jack had never seen himself look better. He reacted as if he were seeing himself for the first time. He said to Bud, "I wish you could see us, boy. I swear I wish you could see us. I've never seen that before in my life, never, believe your ears. I could hear myself playing and you blowing, and see it just as plain as I'm sitting here looking at you." Playback made them part of the process. We were no longer taking away their spirit, but rather were offering immediate gratification for the trouble we were putting them through. They played with renewed vigor, willing to go on all night.

When the sun went down, our lights were up and we kept on shooting, It was midnight before we wrapped. After packing the van, everyone took a pull on the Jim Beam that Jack and Bud had been working on all evening, and then we sat down in the moonlight to relax. After a few minutes Bud started blowing his harp and singing, "Rock me baby, all night long On the other side of the porch, Jack picked up the tune on the guitar and for the next twenty minutes they traded verses. It was the kind of blues that gets into your tireddest places and makes them feel all right. To this day I can close my eyes to see that porch and hear the haunting interplay of harp and guitar, and Bud saying, "Take your time, sing that song right.

In the coming weeks I was privileged to photograph blues greats like Sam Chatmon, R.L. Burnside, and Eugene Powell (Sonny Boy Nelson), as well as exciting sessions with lesser known musicians such as Boyd Rivers, Clyd Maxwell, and Belton Sutherland. Lonny Pitchford and Napoleon Strickland not only played the blues, but built one string “diddly bows” on the sides of their houses for us.

After the first two sessions we realized that if we were to avoid technical mishaps and keep set-up and strike time to a minimum, we would have to streamline our operation. Cliff Tobias, the ETV engineer who traveled with us, strapped and gaffer-tapped all the components into place in the van so that the VGA, monitor, scope, audio mixers, and power supplies would remain hooked up as we traveled. This allowed us to shoot landscapes and pick up shots on battery power, or to plug into AG and become as elaborate as necessary.

After a shakedown week under the protective wing of ETV and with the moral and camera support of Ludwig Goon, we hit the road and spent the remaining three weeks working out of Greenville and Senetobia. When we needed a second camera, ETV would send Ludwig and the field recording unit (FRU).

The first day out was a session with four men who had worked in the levee camps, members of a generation that left the farms and plantations to become the migrant labor force which built the levees, roads, and railroads. Alan had recorded levee camp songs in the 1930’s and again in the 1960s, but

Impressions from LAND WHERE THE BLUES BEGAN

Everybody gets the blues, but not everyone can sing the blues; a great folk performer is as rare as a virtuoso classical musician. Even in the fabled Mississippi delta, it’s a special person who can play guitar, preach a sermon, or synthesize the history of a people in his conversation. Each artist has a particular flavor, part personality and part drawn from the land on which he lives. This is what LAND WHERE THE BLUES BEGAN captures.

Bud Spires is gregarious and expansive. He’s played harmonica behind Jack Owens for many years; they sit almost touching as Bud follows Jack’s every musical turn. Jack is rooted and cautious; the force of his personality becomes apparent in the authority of his guitar and the precise articulation of his singing. Their contrast typifies the tension of the music, a facile and playful sparkle over the well-spring of tradition and deep consideration.

Eugene Powell displays two sides of his personality. The first night he is morose and tells a rambling story about his youth as a cowboy. He bragged to the rancher that he could break a horse that had already killed two men. After a harrowing struggle, Gene did ride the horse; however, the point of the story was not his horsemanship, bravery, or foolhardiness, but the indifference of the rancher who didn’t care if he lived or died. This happened over fifty years before, yet it still burned like a slap in the face. The next night he is wickedly engaging as he tells about playing the blues in levee camps and juke joints, avoiding the wrath of husbands and lovers of the women who flocked around him.

Sam Chatmon’s father had been a fiddler in slavery times and had played for balls in the manor houses. Sam and his brothers formed the Mississippi Sheiks who composed such standards as

his informants had always been reluctant to talk about life in the camps themselves.

This conversation was different; it was as if they had been waiting their whole lives for the media to come so they could put down a record of how it really was. Cliff fed cassette after cassette into the recorder as the conversation ricocheted around the group. They talked about mules, and impossible work conditions and why they left the farms. But always there was the pride of survival; these men had been dealt a harsh hand and won.

That night we joined the same men in Mira's cafe, a rough, crowded, hard-drinking place on Nelson St. in Greenville. I set up lights and Cliff ran cables, and we set about recording the tall tales in their original setting. It was very hard to shoot because people were pressed against me and jostling most of the time. The patrons kept pushing the best talkers forward to declaim, and they were loud and enthusiastic in their appreciation. It was barely controlled madness. But underneath the eloquent despair we recorded on the levee was being reworked as a verbal art form. The footage has a live, dynamic feel; and despite high ambience, the sound was quite intelligible.

After the sessions on the levee camp and in Mira's cafe. We realized that we more than just sample segments for a magazine format show. We had the thread of a complex and largely untold story about the socioeconomic phenomena that created and supported the blues. The concept of the edited program began taking shape, and the emerging story line guided and

"Corinna, Corinna," "Sitting on Top of the World," and "Trouble in Mind." Courteous and unflappable, he controls the image he presents. His universal appeal can be traced to his flowing white beard and well-honed metaphors for the politics of sexual liaisons. As he says, "The blues is about a woman. If you have the blues about a woman, your wife or anybody, and they misuse you, you will go and make up a song to sing instead of telling her in words."

While driving a tractor, R.L. Burnside sings the same hollers he once did plowing behind a mule. He gestures to a cotton picking combine and said, "Back by hand picking cotton, it used to take a man about a week to pick a bale of cotton, Now this machine here gets about 20 bales a day, about a bale every thirty minutes."

The men from the levee camp interview are as different and as interdependent as the four directions. Bill Gordon is quiet and persuasive, his stories are economical and you believe every word. He tells about not being allowed to warm his hands working on cold days building the levees on the Mississippi River. "It'd be so cold out there, they wouldn't let you go to the fire. You have to let your lines slip through your hand. You'd get up to the fire . . . you could let the mules keep agoing and let the lines slip through your hands. And when you get to the end, then you got to catch them. You couldn't never just say stop at the fire and warm."

Walter Brown wants to tell the whole story. In other circumstances, he would be a historian. He recounts how orders were given on the levee, "Old Man Brown used to take his hat off his head. He wore a big white Stetson and he'd throw it up and shoot six holes in it before it hit the ground. Then he'd tell someone down there, 'Hand me my hat.' And they would hand it to him and he'd say, 'Now I'm gonna whip you if you stand and I'm

informed the rest of our shooting.

Worth Long had done considerable research on the gandy shouts of railroad workers and wanted to document this work song tradition in context. It was one of the most complicated shoots to arrange. The Vicksburg office of the Illinois Central railroad arranged for us to work along with a crew who would be replacing a rail and straightening part of the track. Most of this work is now done by machine, but this crew still does small jobs by hand. They no longer sing as they work, but the men had all been part of singing gangs in the past and were excited about recreating the older work style. Worth brought in some of his now retired informants to lead the songs. ETV sent Ludwig with the FRU so we would have a second camera and an AC generator.

gonna kill you If you run. I want you to get me some dirt. I got to finish such and such a station by such and such a time. Is there any questions?' When he ask you that, he'd have his hand on that pistol."

Joe Savage spent most of his life in jail. His talk is not well focused, but his unaccompanied singing crystallizes the turmoil of the disenfranchised male. To hear Joe Savage is to know that the human voice is the most important instrument of the blues. Starting with a rising moan as he tenses his throat to bring up the pitch, his verses recapitulate what the other men said, and placed end on end make an epic poem.

For several hours we spelled each other shooting the slow process of changing a rail. We shot footage of a train going by, talk about the life of a railroad man, and two-camera coverage of work songs as the crew lined track, tamped ties, and spikes down. Everyone felt good, and it was visually beautiful; the talk had been forceful and to the point, the singing was mellow, and shooting in a real context gave the material added dimension. The railroad crew finished their job about the same time we did and went to screen the rushes. The supervisor who was in radio contact with the control tower said the next train wouldn't be by for another half hour.

We began the desultory process of disconnecting and coiling the cables. Cliff said, "His radio said the train was leaving the bridge, that's no thirty minutes away." I shrugged and started back to the tracks when a test chart hit the bushes beside me. Up on the tracks, Alan was moving faster than I've ever seen a man move, and Ludwig was whipping cables back and forth like a madman. Then we heard the whistle and saw the train 200 yards away. The Ikegami and the 300 foot multicore cable for the TKP were still on the track along with a tangle of other cables and paraphernalia. Somehow we got everything off the track but two mike cables—and we laughed all the way back to Greenville.

The FRU was pressed into service again to tape the dancing at summer picnics in Northwest Mississippi. There was never enough AC power for our lights, so we needed the generator. The HL-77, designed for the

unpredictable conditions of ENG, was able to pull very beautiful imagery from the harsh and contrasty lighting we had to work with. We flooded the dance grounds with about 2000 watts of quartz light for fill. When I shot, Ludwig would follow with a 759-watt light on a ten-foot pole as a moving key light. It would have been a risky enterprise for a film shoot, but the ENG camera was very responsive to this fluid reality: the camera occasionally feels like a participant rather than an observer.

Our last session brought us full circle as we taped the baptism of the people who had been saved at the revival which launched our shooting. If only in a symbolic way, it closed the set and resolved the loose ends.

My experience with portapak and industrial video had initially led me to believe the video medium would be a limiting factor in this project. When the Ikegami first arrived at ETV, there was considerable kidding about the official model designation—Color Handy Looky System. After only brief experience with the camera there were no more jokes. Broadcast ENG proved to be more flexible, reliable, and aesthetically pleasing than I had ever expected. Although heavy, the HL-77 was well-balanced and easy to hold whether on the shoulder, lap or cradled in the arms.

The colorimetry was superb. Color balance for any light source was achieved in seconds by pointing the camera at a white card and depressing the auto white balance button. You could watch the color casts disappear on the monitor as the picture became answer print perfect. An extremely fast and smooth auto iris allowed moving the camera through unevenly lit sets, from sun to shade, etc., without the iris adjustment being perceptible on the screen. The only troublesome situation was strong backlight.

Working in video made lighting much faster and easier because the effects were instantly visible on the monitor. The key light had to be sufficient to give 100% white (which did not mean much light since the camera could make an image by moonlight). We usually bounced additional lights into the background to reduce contrast.

Using video gave us an advantage in dealing with informants because they were clearly “on television,” a modality they understood. Everyone knows about ActionCam and Instant Eye News, but the general consciousness about film places it somewhere between **JAWS** and army hygiene instructionals.

We budgeted twenty hours of tape and ended up shooting forty at an additional cost of only \$1000. In film we would not have had that option because the additional cost would have been closer to \$15,000. Video is definitely cost effective for high-ratio, unscripted shooting when post-production is in limbo. With film, a major part of the budget is irreversibly

consumed by raw stock, processing, and workprinting before you know if you have material for a good film. A video production will ultimately cost the same, but the big expense comes in signal processing and final editing at the end of the project. We could not have been as expansive in our shooting if we had been using film, though editing would have been infinitely easier.

Post-production is where video bogs down and can get beyond the reach of independent producers. Video has no dimension except time and voltage; no tangible image, only ghosts of decaying phosphor. Getting from a 3/4 inch original tape to a broadcast-ready editing program involves an enormously expensive complex of equipment and engineering expertise.

In this case there was no money and no provision for editing. Back in Massachusetts I borrowed 1/2-inch editing equipment and ETV agreed to up-dub the originals to quad, adding time code and making me 1/2-inch copies with burned in SMPTE code. While I began sorting and rough editing, they applied for a post-production grant.

Half-inch reel to reel editing has the advantage that you can manually rock the tape back and forth to find the exact frame of the edit points as is done in film. The corresponding SMPTE numbers are written in an edit log. Unfortunately the actual half-inch assembly is rarely frame accurate, and my equipment did not perform vertical interval edits, so the picture broke up at each edit point. The flow of the edit existed primarily in my head; the shot list constituted a precise record of decisions, and the 1/2-inch assembly served as a mnemonic and sketch pad. It required much more discipline and ability to visualize than film editing. However the disadvantages were somewhat offset by the flexibility retained by not cutting the work tapes. Blocks of material could be rearranged several ways for comparative purposes.

By far the most frustrating aspect of video is handling the audio. Even simple effects like combining background sync, music, and narration in a single shot (not to mention over a series of shots) is virtually impossible. Some facilities get around this by using SMPTE controlled eight-track tape for audio mixing but this was not available. We limited our audio effects severely and did a simple A&B mix from two quad tapes for our final sound.

It was often said during production that the material would edit itself. As any editor knows that is never the case; particularly if there are three people passionately involved in the final content and style of a program abstracted from forty hours of footage. After I finished the rough-cut, Alan and Worth came to Massachusetts for recutting and writing the script. I then fine-cut the program on 1/2-inch and made up an elaborate shot list of SMPTE numbers. This list had to be very detailed with the length of every wipe and dissolve, every key, every sound cut, and every voice-over, because I knew there would be little opportunity for creative editing on the CMX at ETV.

I have operated computer editors as if they were keyboard controlled Steenbecks, and they are a joy to use. However at ETV, the CMX functions primarily as an adjunct to the engineering department for speeding up the mechanics of post-production. Computer editing of this project consisted of my casting the ideas and data from the shot list in terms of the machine's capability and communicating this to Ike Touchstone who translated them into the CMX.

We began by making a frame perfect 3/4-inch work tape. The purpose of doing this was to generate a list of commands in the computer memory that would be used when we went online to do the quad edit (which required a full production crew in addition to the CMX operator). It was a slow process: a relatively simple concept like dissolving from a guitar player to a landscape and from the landscape to another musician while the two music tracks dissolve under the landscape requires six discreet entries into the computer. Once this first CMX assembly was done, the program could be tinkered with by changing the edit list. The on-line edit took only two days, even though almost 400 separate operations had to be performed utilizing over forty different source tapes.

THE LAND WHERE THE BLUES BEGAN was finished in September of 1979 and was broadcast in Mississippi on February 23, 1980. It is scheduled for national broadcast on PBS in May, 1980.

JOHN M. BISHOP is an independent filmmaker from Haverhill, Ma. He photographed and edited **THE LAND WHERE THE BLUES BEGAN**. He has also made the films **RHESUS PLAY** and **YOYO MAN** and is the author of the books, **AN EVER-CHANGING PLACE** and the forthcoming, **MAKING HOME VIDEO**.

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