

Joe Pullum remains one of the mystery men of the blues. In the mid-'30s he recorded 30 songs in less than two years, then disappeared for a decade and a half before making an obscure last bow. The only known photograph of him is a small mugshot in a bluebird catalogue. As late as the mid-'80s, his critical bibliography consisted of a single magazine article, and his discography of just a few tracks on anthologies. He was from Houston's Fourth Ward, and when he made his first record in 1934 was perhaps in his late 20s. At some stage he had a radio show on Houston's KILC with a pianist called Peachey. He moved to the West Coast, probably in the '40s, recorded for a couple of Los Angeles labels in the early '50s (see Vol. 2 [DOC2-5394]) and is thought to have died in L.A. about 1965. Conjectures and anecdotes aside, this is most of what we know about him.

Yet he had a substantial hit with his first recording, "**Black Gal What Makes Your Head So Hard?**".

It was copied in the year of its release by Leroy Carr on Vocalion, Jimmy Gordon on Decca (under the flagrantly similar name of Joe Bullum) and Mary Johnson, also for Decca. Versions continued to appear over the next few years, by Josh White, Clarence Williams' Orchestra, the Harlem Hamfats and other artists – and by Pullum himself, who created three further variants. By the '60s, now seen as a standard, the song had been recorded by artists as different from each other as Walter Horton, Lightnin' Hopkins and Skip James.

What is it about "**Black Gal**" that has lodged it in the minds of so many musicians and listeners? At first, surely, it was Pullum's way with the song. Though his voice was pitched extremely high he sang with no sense of effort: the vocal line moves, limpid and graceful, in long slow swoops, interspersed with phrases that are almost spoken. (One begins to see why it should have appealed to a singer like Skip James.)

Once Pullum's original had begun to fade from people's memories, melody and lyrics continued to hold an audience. It was an easy tune to remember, after all, and the song was not just one text but rather a nexus of "**Black Gal**" songs, for Pullum's three follow-ups were verbally different both from the original and from each other, and subsequent versions by other people often mingled stanzas from several of them. Pianist Robert Shaw's text on Artistic CD 377, for instance, amalgamates a large chunk of the first "**Black Gal**" with smaller pieces of the second and third versions.

The composite text of all Pullum's "**Black Gal**" variants unites stanzas of lounging and even tenderness with ones of extreme violence, as he seeks to punish his woman's hard-headedness – that is, her preference for another man – with a "smokin' 41", or, in the 1951 update "*My Woman – Part 2*" (DOC2-5394), an atomic bomb. (Seeing her with another woman, however, leaves him no option but suicide.) Much of the effect of "**Black Gal**" and Pullum's other slow blues is derived from the contrast between images of anger or desperation and the ethereal plainness of his voice. Sometimes, as in "**Married Woman Blues**", his sound almost supplants his meaning, taking on the cool detachment of a solo by Miles Davis.

Most people credit Pullum with composing "**Black Gal**". Victoria Spivey claimed to have been there "in his house in the bloody Fifth Ward in Houston, Texas, when Joe was making up the words" – in 1925, she thought – while Robert Shaw had a story about him conceiving it after an encounter with a woman at a party. "That song come out of two men and half a pint of whiskey," Mack McCormick's view in 1963 was that it "evolved with half a dozen members of the [Santa Fe] group [of pianists] contributing verses and melodic bits until Joe Pullum's hit record made it a nationally known blues standard", and given the known

complexity of some other blues' origins such a theory seems at least plausible.

The thematic contrasts within the "Black Gal" song-group are not so evident in his other blues, which, when slow, often express a conventional downheartedness ("Woman, Oh Woman", "Bad Break Blues", "Some Day") or if fast elicit a more buoyant attitude ("Rack It Back And Tell It Right"). But whatever the style of the song, Pullum had a dextrous hand with a lyric. Note the elegant syntax of

*I'm coming to you, baby,  
if through 20 feet of water I wade,  
For I can't stand to see my baby  
fill a watery grave."*

("Mississippi Flood Blues")

or this neat metaphor in "Some Day", perhaps inspired by his relationship with his record company:

*My pockets are empty and I haven't got a dime  
But I haven't signed a contract, woman,  
to stay broke all the time."*

Pullum's accompanist on the first 15 selections (the soloist on items 6 and 14) was ROBERT COOPER, known to contemporaries as "Parduke" or "Pardue", from Houston's Third Ward; he was probably about the same age. His knowledge of the repertoire shared by McCormick's "Santa Fe group" – pianists like Robert Shaw, Pinetop Burks and Buster Pickens – is proved by his rendering of "Here I Come With My Dirty Ducks On" ("Cows, See That Train Comin'") and the flamboyant "McKinney Street Stomp" and the two "West Dallas Drag" tunes, inventive blues improvisations with a tinge of ragtime.

For his second session (tracks 8–15) Pullum came up with a wider range of material. "Careful Drivin' Mama" was a "point" number that might have been conceived by Roosevelt Sykes, but with an additional point, as Paul Oliver notes: car parking was a topical issue in Houston at the time, and the city soon

afterwards claimed the title, probably not a fiercely contested one, of "Parking Meter Capital of the World". "Mississippi Flood Blues" – a curious subject as late as 1935 – has a comic moment in the second line of the first verse: Pullum confuses his images and reports that "the rain howled and the wind began to fall". The surrounding items feature Cooper, romping in "Rack It Back And Tell It Right" and conjuring up an atmospheric, dreamy mood in "Blues With Class". Partnering Pullum on his third session (tracks 16–24) was the Galveston pianist ANDY BOY. (See Vol. 2 [DOCD-5394] for the remaining two items from this session and further information on Andy Boy.) Many of these songs share a leisurely tempo and a similar vocal line, but some variation is provided by Andy Boy's roccoco solos. "I Believe In You" differs in having a wordier first line and an ABC (rather than the common AAB) verse structure. "I Can't Control Myself", which shares that structure, has enough dull lines and awkward phrases ("I'm just a poor fool am I") to suggest that Pullum was feeling the strain of inventing 11 new songs. But the 32-bar "Dixie My Home" is an attractive number. The nostalgic memories of "mummy" and "that Swanee shore" may sound as if they come from a Stephen Foster song, and perhaps they did, but as it happens they closely echo the sentiments of Louie Johnson's "Sleepy Water Blues" (1931).

*Tony Russell (July 1995)*

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Paul Oliver, notes to *The Piano Blues Volume Eight: Texas Seaport 1934–1937* (Magpie PY1108) (1978).  
Guido van Rijn, *Cor van Sliedregt & Hans Vergeer, notes to Joe Pullum, "Black Gal" (Agnostic Blues AB 2012) (1986).*  
Mack McCormick, Victoria Spivey & Chris Strachwitz, notes to Robert Shaw, *The Ha Gruder" (Arbuckle CD 377) (1992).*

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