

"I was born at Port Gibson, Mississippi...December 26th, 1902."

With these words J.D. Short began to tell his story to Sam Charters, who interviewed and recorded Short in July, 1962, at J.D.'s home on Cole Street in St. Louis. Only a few weeks later Short died from a serious circulatory ailment, which had afflicted him since receiving an injury during army service.

J.D. Short, like Mercy Dee and Barrelhouse Buck, died before the establishment of the blues circuit which, over the past ten years or so, has enabled white audiences in America, Europe and elsewhere to see many fine blues artists rescued from ill-deserved obscurity. Short came to the attention of record producer Bob Koester in 1955, when Bob was still editing Jazz Report, and struggling to get his new Delmar label off the ground. They met through J.D.'s cousin, Big Joe Williams, who a few days earlier had visited Bob's St. Louis record shop to audition for Delmar. In those days, Joe and J.D. worked the local taverns together when Joe was in town. (J.D. also had a one-man band rig - rack harmonica, guitar, bass drum and foot cymbal - for solo dates). A rehearsal session was held at J.D.'s home, with J.D. playing second guitar and harmonica. He also contributed a couple of vocals, and one of these, his version of J.T. Smith's "Howling Wolf Blues", led to an unfortunate misunderstanding.

Koester knew Short as a legendary recording artist who had made a handful of extremely rare and musically individual recordings for Paramount and Vocalion during the Depression. Bob's sleeve note to Delmar DL-602 shows that J.D. had helped enhance the aura of mystery placed around him by his ability to reproduce the recorded repertoire of J.T. "Funny Papa" Smith. Although he had reservations about whether Short and Smith were the same man (aurally there was never any real evidence for this), Bob made the assumption in his notes to DL-602, retracting it in those to DL-609. Possibly J.D. met Smith or spent some time in East Texas, as Bob suggests, but the explanation may simply be that he liked the blues of Funny Papa Smith and Texas Alexander, and learned them from the artists' records, which sold widely in the South.

J.D. had been in St. Louis for nearly 35 years when he recorded for Delmar, but his musical roots were in the Mississippi Delta country where he was raised. He was born on a plantation near Port Gibson ("right up the hill from the old brick kiln" as he told Koester), a small town in Claiborne County on Highway 61, thirty miles south of Vicksburg. (A photograph of Port Gibson's Presbyterian church steeple, which terminates in a hand pointing to the sky, appears on page 113 of Frederic Ramsey's book, 'Been Here And Gone'.)

When J.D. was six, his family moved nearly a hundred miles north up Highway 61 to Hollandale, a small Delta town south-east of Greenville. It was here that he heard the blues for the first time, songs like "East St. Louis Blues" and "Make Me Down A Pallet On The Floor", and the unaccompanied hollers of workers in the fields. There was a local guitarist named Willie Johnson from whom J.D. picked up the rudiments of blues guitar, although at the time he was more interested in mastering the harmonica.

Around 1910 Charley Patton visited J.D.'s father's cabin at "Little Mirthy Bow" (probably Murphy, a few miles east of Hollandale near the Sunflower River), and played his guitar. Patton obviously used a bottleneck on this occasion, as J.D. could recall him making the guitar 'say', "Lord have mercy, save poor me", a technique which Patton employed in his two-part "Prayer Of Death" recording. Charley was apparently playing at a nearby log camp at the time.

In 1912 the Short family moved north from Washington County along Highway 61 and settled in Clarksdale, where J.D. lived for the next eleven years. It was here that he completed his musical education, developing his own guitar style and learning how to play guitar and rack harp together. In 1919 he learned blues piano from Son Harris in Sholes (not on my map, but presumably located somewhere in Coahoma County). He never recorded on this instrument, unfortunately.

Amongst the guitarists Short encountered between 1912 and 1923 were Willie Ebsen, Red Willie (from Shelby, Mississippi), Marty Bishop ("a great guitar player. He got killed before I left from down there.") and "Coot", who used to play the "Red River Blues". He also mentions a Willie Dobson, who might possibly have been Red Willie. Clarksdale was already the blues centre for the Northern half of the Delta, and one

can imagine J.D. playing his guitar and rack harp on the streets, just as Howlin' Wolf was to do a few years later.

At the age of 20, J.D. headed North, arriving in St. Louis on April 16th, 1923. In the twenties St. Louis was pulsing with intense musical activity, and there was a thriving blues community. J.D. worked days at a brass foundry, playing clubs and parties in the evenings and at weekends.

In the late twenties quite a number of St. Louis based artists got onto record - Henry Brown, Edith Johnson, Roosevelt Sykes, Teddy Darby, Mary Johnson and Henry Townsend, to name but six - and J.D.'s turn came in 1930, when he secured a date for the premier country blues label, Paramount. The session was held on or about 1st June in Grafton, Wisconsin, and at least six sides were recorded. Of the three known 78s, one has been reissued (Paramount 13043 on Origin OJL-11, 'The Mississippi Blues No.2 - The Delta'), and at least one of the other two has not been recovered. After a thousand issues, many of which had been very successful, Paramount's blues series rapidly went into a sales decline during the Depression year of 1930, and by the time J.D.'s records came out the following year, Paramount were only pressing a thousand or less of each release. Many of the Paramount 13000 series are extremely rare and no longer exist.

"Drafted Mama" and "Wake Up Bright Eye Mama" (Paramount 13040, same number used earlier for a Charlie Patton issue), like "Flaggin' It To Georgia" and "Tar Road Blues" (Paramount 13091), are only titles in the Paramount catalogue, but fortunately 13043 is available to all. (Possibly "Flaggin' It To Georgia" may have some connection with the fact that J.D.'s grandmother lived in Atlanta, Georgia, during slavery time. She apparently composed a number of spirituals. Possibly J.D. still had some relatives in Georgia in 1930.)

J.D.'s references to the denizens of the swampland in "Lonesome Swamp Rattlesnake" imbue his blues with a quality of mystery appropriate to the bayous and cypress groves of the Mississippi valley. The snake, whether it be the "Crawlin' King Snake", Blind Lemon's "Black Snake" or Short's "Lonesome Swamp Rattlesnake", does, of course, have great significance as a phallic symbol in the blues, but it also has superstitious associations deriving from the snake myths which were legion amongst country negroes. J.D.'s song has an eerie feeling about it; "Way lonesome, out in some swamp I know," sings J.D., and then proceeds to build up a fantasy in which his woman is besieged by rattlesnakes (with both human and reptile attributes) which crawled around his door and up to his bed.

'Way lonesome, out in some swamp I know (x2),

Well, the lonesome rattlesnake just creaped up to my door.

You ought to heard my baby hollering, "Daddy, won't you come home?"

Heard my baby hollering, "Daddy won't you come home?"

"Better be on your way, the rattlesnake's 'bout to take your home."

That's all right, baby, I won't leave you here no more (x2),

For that creeping rattlesnake done crawled up to my door.

Walking 'long and ain't doing a thing (x2),

I met a rattlesnake, oh, baby, at last.

I can't travel, honey, night and day (x2),

Lord, these rattlesnakes travelling won't let me get away.

Croeping rattlesnakes done crawled around my bed (x2),

And it loved my woman, and, man, it done fell dead.

I love my baby, and I know for sure (x2),

But these creeping rattlesnakes done crawled up to my door.

Gonna sing this song, and I ain't gon' sing no more (x2),

For that creeping rattlesnake done crawled up to my door.

Have you ever been lonely, honey and feel so blue? (x2)

When the rattlesnake crawl, there ain't nobody can tell you what to do.

The reverse of 13043, "Telephone Arguin' Blues", may have developed from an actual incident, J.D. trying to 'phone back home to St. Louis from Grafton and having trouble with busy lines and crossed wires. The line in verse 1, if correctly transcribed, is especially strange and striking.

There's so many people arguing on the telegram (x2),

(This thought have run through my head just a stone in sand.)

Early this morning trying to get a news through,
 Early this morning trying to get a news over the line,
 Lord, I just want to talk to that teasing fare of mine.
 Hello, Central, please give me five-o-nine (x2),
 I just want to talk to that old time gal of mine.
 Hey, arguing, arguing everywhere,
 And they arguing, arguing everywhere,
 I can't get no message over the phone nowhere I go.
 Mmmmm, baby, when can I speak to you? (x2)
 If you don't stop for me soon, baby, I don't know what I'm going to do.
 I picked up the receiver, I could not get a word,
 I picked up the receiver, I could not get no word,
 I want to talk to my home from this sad news I heard.
 I'm asking you a question, mama, asking you very clear (x2),
 And if all things true, man, I'm gonna leave on the (li-yun here).
 Mmmmm, ain't seen my baby in six long months today,
 I ain't seen my baby six long months today,
 Some woman (love) I used to have done seen my babe some day.

The guitar accompaniments to both pieces provide powerful rhythmic support to J.D.'s intense vocals (at times he sounds to be slapping the strings rather like Patton), but there is little melodic variation. There is a cough at the end of "Rattlesnake", but by mid-1930 Paramount weren't bothering to make second takes.

On March 14th, 1932, J.D. was again in a recording studio, this time in New York City. A group of St. Louis artists were in the "Big Apple" to record for Vocalion (ARC had not yet opened their Chicago studios) - Charley Jordan, Peetie Wheatstraw, J.D. Short and Hi Henry Brown. (Lonnie Johnson was also in town, recording for Columbia on the 17th.) Charley, who may have organised the session (he was at that time a record company talent scout as well as a blues artists), recorded first, cutting four sides with Peetie on piano (masters 11470, 71, 72 and 73). J.D. then recorded two solo sides (11474 and 75). Next came Hi Henry Brown's justly celebrated "Titanic Blues" and "Preacher Blues" (11476 and 77), with Jordan playing second guitar. Of the remaining two sides by J.D. (11478 and 79), "Let Me Mash That Thing" apparently features piano accompaniment by Peetie Wheatstraw (I haven't heard this recording), while "Grand Daddy Blues" is a solo vocal and guitar effort.

Both of J.D.'s Vocalion 78s were issued as by 'Jelly Jaw Short', a nickname he acquired because of a nervous affliction which caused his jaw to tremble when he sang. (At least, this is the explanation given in the notes to DL-609. Sam Charters attributes it to J.D.'s "unique vibrato". 25 years after the Vocalion session, when Big Joe and J.D. were recording for Delmar, Joe several times referred to J.D. as 'Jelly Joe'.)

The lyrics of "Snake Doctor Blues" (Vocalion 1704) are based on the country superstition that the large swamp dragon-fly is a 'snake doctor', alighting on injured snakes and bringing them back to life. The song also has phallic overtones and voodoo references. The snake deity is central to voodoo worship, and the hoodoo doctor keeps a snake in a box. The oldtime conjure doctors used to go into the swamps to gather their own herbs and roots, such as the well known John The Conqueror and Wonder Of The World Root. The use of the 'crooks' mentioned in verse 4 of this fascinating blues is obscure, but perhaps refers to hooking and catching snakes.

It is unfortunate that only one take was made, as J.D. gets confused at the beginning of verse 5, and garbles what would otherwise be a line of rare quality, comparable to Willie McTell's beautiful "Big star falling, mama, 'tain't long fo' day". In fairness to J.D., I give here the correct version of the line, before transcribing the actual recording: "The evening star might rise and the midnight wind might blow."

SPOKEN: I'm a snake doctor man, everybody's trying to find out my name.

I fly by easy but I fly in low, low distant land.

I'm a snake doctor man, everybody's trying to find out my name (x2),

And when I fly by easy, mama, I'm gonna fly in low, low distant lands.

I'm a snake doctor man, gang of womens everywhere I go,

I'm a snake doctor man, gathers a gang of womens everywhere I go,

And when I get to flying sometime, I can see a gang of women standing out in the door.

I'm goin' fly by easy, man and you know I ain't gonna fly very low (x2),
When I got a little jinx in my pack, man, don't nobody know.
I got many crooks in my bag and the dyinest snake can crawl (x2),
I puts up a solid foundation mens, and you know it don't never fall.
The evening star might blow (sic) and the midnight wind might rise,
The evening star might rise and the midnight star (sic) might blow,
And when I put up a solid foundation I don't have to look for that woman no more.
I'm a snake doctor man, got my medicine I say in my bag (x2),
I mean to be a real snake doctor man, you know I don't mean to be no fag.
Lord, I know many of you mens are wondering what the snake doctor man got in his hands (x2),

He got roots and herbs, steal a woman, man everywhere he lands.

"Snake Doctor" and its reverse, "Barefoot Blues", are melodically very similar, but J.D.'s powerful singing and potent guitar rhythms, and the different lyric content, make them quite distinct performances. His guitar playing here parallels that of Henry Townsend, although their styles are by no means identical. J.D. does not use the distinctive treble string snap that characterises Henry's performances, but has his own guitar vibrato, created by pulling the strings while "flailing with his whole hand".

"Barefoot Blues" is a mean mistreater blues, and one of the best of the genre:

SPOKEN: Now mama let's get stomped out and get drunk and run.

'Cos I'm a hard workin' man, you think I'm gonna be a slave for you all my life.

And you know the reason, you don't know how to treat a good man right.

Now let's get stomped out sweet mama and get drunk and run (x2),

I don't feel like ballin' with you mama, but I just feel like havin' my fun.

Now if you have a long ways to travel, long ways from your home (x2),

Baby (use) all my money for whiskey and gettin' drunk, mama you don't know how you carry on.

I worked hard daily, daily, mama, trying to make a good home for you,

I worked hard daily, daily, trying to make a good home, home for you,

Lord you do things to your good man, mama to make him feel so blue.

In a few more days now mama, your good man gonna be goin' away (x2),

You gonna miss that hard workin' man, you gonna need his help someday.

I work hard daily, daily, bring you home my pay,

I work hard now daily, woman, bring you home my pay,

I can't see how you have the nerve mama (to) treat a good man this-a-way.

Lord I'll believe I'll go mama, don't feel welcome here,

Now I believe I'll go mama, Lord I don't feel welcome here,

You a no-good woman, you don't feel no hard-working man's care.

Spiders, like snakes, occur frequently in country blues symbolism. Peetie Wheatstraw recorded his "King Spider Blues" for Decca in 1935; Robert Lockwood made a "Black Spider Blues" for Bluebird in 1941; and one of Muddy Waters' early recordings was about a "Mean Red Spider". There are many other examples, and verses such as "Spider, spider, crawlin' up the wall, He going up there just to get his ashes hauled" are well known. One prewar recording artist even dubbed himself Black Spider Dumplin'. In Short's "Grand Daddy Blues" (Vocalion 1708) the 'grand daddy' spider is an object of bad luck onto which he projects his loneliness and desolation. (At no time during the song does J.D. actually use the word 'spider', but it seems likely that this is what he refers to; although it should be noted that daddy-long-legs (crane flies) are also known as grand-daddies in the South, and it may be that Short was referring to this insect, and not to a spider, although the use of the word 'crawl' would be more appropriate to the latter than the former. See page 341 of the paperback edition of Zora Neale Hurston's "Mules And Men" for a root doctor's prescription that includes mashed-up 'grand-daddies'.

Now please Mister Grand-daddy, don't crawl up and down my wall (x2),

You will soon put me in bad luck and I won't have no woman at all.

It was early this morning, I was lying down on my floor (x2),

I was keeping diddy-watch on my wall so that grand-daddy won't crawl in my house no more.

If that grand-daddy crawls, boy you soon be in my shape some old day (x2),

You won't have no true lovin' woman for to pass your troubles away.
When you get bad luck in your home, there's a few men know just how it feels (x2),
It takes a real good woman for to satisfy her who won't (....).
I get weak and lonesome sometimes in a dark room by myself (x2),
The reason I feel that way, mama, ain't got nobody to feel my care.

There is an instrumental introduction, and a guitar chorus after verse 3, thereby reducing the usual six or seven verses to five.

Although Charley and Peetie recorded again on March 15th, and Henry and Peetie on the 17th, there were no further recordings by Short. (It was at this session that Peetie accompanied himself on guitar on all four sides he cut.) J.D.'s third and final pre-war recording session came just over a year later, when he took part in a mammoth, day-long session, held in Chicago by Victor to provide material for their newly launched Bluebird label.

On August 2nd, 1933, a group of St. Louis-based artists, amongst them Walter Davis, the Sparks Brothers, Charlie McFadden, J.D. Short, James "Stump" Johnson, St. Louis Jimmy and Roosevelt Sykes, were in Chicago to record for Bluebird. Matrices 76835 and 36 were by a female singer named Georgia Boyd, presumably also from St. Louis. On one title she was accompanied by Roosevelt Sykes on piano, on the other, "Never Mind Blues", by J.D. Short on guitar. His accompaniment to Miss Boyd is rather more mellow and melodic than the accompaniments to his own vocals.

J.D. made two solo sides (matrices 76837 and 38), which were issued on Bluebird B-5169 under the pseudonym Joe Stone. (It is interesting that Big Joe Williams referred to Short as Jelly Joe during the Delmar sessions. Possibly Joe was actually Short's first name. Big Joe could possibly shed some light on this.) "It's Hard Time" is described in the sleeve note to Yazoo L-1003 (on which it is reissued) as "perhaps the greatest blues song that takes the Depression as its theme", an assessment with which I would largely agree (although there are plenty of other candidates for the title, e.g. The Mississippi Sheiks' "Times Done Got Hard" and Big Joe Williams' "Providence Help The Poor People".)

And it's hard time here, hard time everywhere (x2),
And it's hard time here, baby, it's hard time everywhere.
I went down to the factory where I worked for years,
I went down to the factory, worked for years (before),
And the bossman told me, "Man, I ain't hiring here (no more).
Now we have a little city, call down in Hooverville,
And we have a little city, call down in Hooverville,
Times done got so hard, people ain't got no place (to live).
Don't the moon look pretty, shining down through the trees (x2),
I can see my fair brown, swear to God and she can't see me.
Sun rose this morning I was lyin' down on my floor,
Sun rose this morning, lyin' down on my floor,
Lord I ain't had no teasin' faro, baby, I ain't got no place to go.
I'm gonna sing this song, babe, I ain't gonna sing no more (x2),
'Cos my baby keep on callin', baby and I believe I had better go.
And I hate to hear my faro call my name (x2),
She don't call so lonesome but she call so nice and plain.

("Hoovervilles" were shanty towns that sprang up on the outskirts of cities during the worst of the Depression.) This blues is performed at a much faster tempo than J.D.'s Paramount and Vocalion sides, and has rapid-fire guitar work, spotlighted in the instrumental introduction and the guitar break between verses 6 and 7. Reservations about the identification of Joe Stone with Short have been expressed in the past (I was myself uncertain on first hearing this 78 several years ago), but frequent playing of the Short and Stone 78s juxtaposed on tape removes all doubt. (Try comparing the way he sings "It was early this morning, I was lying down on my floor" in "Grand Daddy Blues" with "Sun rose this morning, I was lyin' down on my floor" in "It's Hard Time".)

The first verse of "Back Door Blues" echoes the "Crowing (Banty) Rooster Blues" of Walter Rhodes and Charley Patton, although the basic verse is probably traditional. Although "Back Door" is slower-paced than "Hard Time", the guitar momentum conveys a

similar feeling of urgency to the performance. As with all J.D.'s pre-war sides, the vocal accents in each line rise and fall in an unusual pattern, adding extra impact to the singing. The lines of his blues are long, often exceptionally long, and sometimes crowding occurs, which results in some words being almost inaudible or omitted altogether.

I'm gonna buy me a little red rooster, mama, tie him at my back door (x2),
When he sees people passing by he will flap his little wings and crow.
I'm gonna buy me a bulldog 'cos my pistol's number fortyone (x2),
I'm gonna shoot you if you stand still, mama, I got a doggone dog to catch you
if you run.
Catch the big boat at the Graveyard, I'm going back to New Orleans (x2),
Because ridin' on the water, mama, seems just like a tonic to me.
Sooner be buried in the river, mama, than to be buried in a hollow log,
Sooner be buried in the river, mama, buried in a hollow log,
'Cos I got a no-good faro and she treat me just like I was a dog.
When I leave this time, mama, please don't hang no hand-crepe on my door,
When I leave this time, mama, don't hang no hand-crepe on my door,
Because I won't be dead but I ain't coming back here no more.
Now I was blue this morning, mama, just as blue as any man can be,
Now I was blue this morning, mama, blue as any man can be,
And I'm wondering why mama that you can't get along with me.

(The stretch of the Mississippi River between St. Louis and Cairo, Illinois, contained many dangerous rocks on which steamboats were regularly wrecked in bad weather, and the worst part was once known as the "Graveyard". See chapter 25 of Mark Twain's "Life On The Mississippi".)

The next three masters were devoted to recordings by James "Stump" Johnson, locally famous in St. Louis for his "Snitcher's Blues". On the third master (76841, "Don't Give My Lard Away") J.D. Short provided the guitar accompaniment under the billing 'Joe C. Stone'. (In the notes to DL-602, Bob Koester mentions the name J.C. Stoat as one of J.D.'s pre-war pseudonyms. He presumably got this from Short himself, perhaps mis-hearing 'Stone' as 'Stoat'.) Next in the studio was Roosevelt Sykes to make two "Willie Kelly" sides that were subsequently issued on Victor. J.D. was not to be heard on record again for almost thirty years.

(In the second part of this article I shall look at J.D. Short's postwar recordings and the last years of his long career as a blues artist.)

NOTE ON THE LYRIC TRANSCRIPTS

Transcribing J.D.'s early recordings has presented some difficulties due to the inevitable deficiencies in recording quality, and J.D.'s tendency to compress or even omit words, but only in one instance has it proved impossible to complete a line, even after repeated listening. This is at the end of verse 4 of "Grand Daddy Blues", where the words are almost completely lost. In the transcripts I have on occasion omitted words like 'baby' (as in verse 2, line 2 of "Grand Daddy"), or left in a 'now' (actually omitted in repeat lines of "Barefoot blues", verses 1 and 2) or a 'mama' (repeat line verse 1 of "Back Door") where this does not affect the sense and saves space.

non J.D. Short content eliminated