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Kent Kaster

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“I’M A STRANGER HERE”:
BLUES MUSIC IN FLORIDA

by Kent Kaster

As much as any state in the American South, Florida evokes a variety of vivid images in the public imagination. In literature, books such as *The Yearling* convey a striking sense of time, place and atmosphere. In terms of the South’s enduring mystique and rich cultural heritage, the state of Florida occupies a prominent place. The abundant treasure of black culture and folk life found in the state has done much to ensure this. Through such works as *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Mules and Men*, native Floridian Zora Neale Hurston revealed the rich traditions of the communities within which she had grown up. However, in comparison to other southern states, such as Mississippi or Texas, little is known about blues music in the lives of black Floridians. Histories of blues music in any area, such as the Mississippi Delta, rest largely on the extensive recordings of performers from that region. Very few commercial recordings emanated from the artistry of Floridian blues performers. As a result, knowledge of blues music in Florida remains minimal when compared to Mississippi, Alabama or Texas.

However, “Tampa Bound Blues,” “Jacksonville Blues” and “Tallahassee Women” represent song titles which show a strong relationship between blues music and Florida. In fact, the lyrics to “Mobile Blues” indicate that black Carolinians, among other southerners, both recognized and reiterated this relationship.

Drop down in North Carolina, you don’t find me there,
Ah, you go to South Carolina, and check it out there,
Go down in Georgia, don’t find me there,
Just drop on down in Florida, and find your loving Daddy somewhere.¹

Afro-American music, including the blues, has its roots in the slave experience. Rhythmic singing eased the burdens of slavery. This communal experience became more individualized after the Civil War when tenant farming replaced plantations. Work of a more solitary nature led to freely structured individualized songs, often embellished by falsetto and extended vocal phrases, known as field hollers because of where they were performed. When jobs required a more collective effort, work songs still provided the favorite type of accompaniment for southern blacks. Freed from slavery but still oppressed by economic, political and social restrictions, blacks developed a self-consciousness that musically transformed the field holler and the work song into the blues. Beginning in the Mississippi Delta, the new music spread throughout the South. Ever present in good times and bad, the blues functioned as an expression of black identity and provided an outlet for the communication of various feelings.²

¹ Kaster: I’m a Stranger Here: Blues Music in Florida

² Published by Scholar Commons, 1988
After the turn of the century, several factors assured the spread and perpetuation of this new American music. Itinerant blues musicians found temporary employment at so-called jook joints, where southern blacks gathered for low-cost entertainment. Black traveling shows, such as the Theater Owners’ Booking Agency, offered steady employment to male and female performers, and stars like Bessie Smith attained celebrity status. The arrival of the phonograph, coupled with the introduction of the “race record” produced by race labels, gave blacks a new medium for their own amusement. The recognition of a black buying public sparked the blues recording boom of the 1920s. The Depression brought new hardships for black communities and blues musicians, but some performers weathered economic distress in northern cities, especially Chicago, where “house rent parties” featured blues singers who raised money to pay the rent. The enthusiastic response heralded the increasing importance of urban centers to blues music.

Beginning in the 1920s, phonograph record companies successfully marketed their product to blacks through a variety of techniques, including mail orders and advertisements that ironically employed racist stereotypes. This selection of ads and clippings includes (upper left) an announcement by Paramount Records that the company had hired J. Mayor Williams as “Recording Manager of the Race Artists’ Series.” The advertisement to the right promises a free portable phonograph in exchange for coupons given with the purchase of records by Memphis Minnie.

Photograph from The Story of the Blues by Paul Oliver.
The common association of blues with either the Mississippi Delta or Chicago overlooks the musical heritage of other areas such as Florida. However, despite significant obstacles, especially the scarcity of recordings to serve as guideposts to names, locations and personalities, the character of Florida blues can be unveiled by concentrating on three areas: nationally recognized individuals from the state, the jook joints hinted at in Zora Neale Hurston’s literary work and local musicians whose lives reveal the rich tradition of Florida blues.

The earliest recordings by a Florida bluesman to gain nationwide popularity debuted on the Paramount label via the talent of Blind Blake. Mystery clouds the origins of the famed guitarist whose fretboard skills left many listeners referring to the instrument in Blake’s hands as a talking guitar. While some sources cite Blake as a native Tampan, the majority agree that it was Arthur Blake, born around 1900 in Jacksonville, who had such a great influence on commercial recording prior to the Depression of the 1930s.

Like many black performers of the day, Blake departed from his home state to display his skills before appreciative crowds on the traveling medicine show circuit. Audiences offered enthusiastic responses to Blake’s stage antics, including some exciting behind-the-head guitar playing. Flashy techniques, however, neither overshadowed Blake’s renown on his instrument nor the respect his artistry received from audiences and musicians alike. Blending ragtime influences with an advanced finger picking style, Blake’s command over his instrument made recordings of “Early Morning Blues” and “West Coast Blues” seem to leap out at listeners. In more relaxed settings, live audiences experienced the subtleties and surprises of Blake’s improvisational skills, which he had earlier perfected in Florida.

During the thirties Blind Blake arrived in Chicago and became a crowd pleaser at house parties throughout the urban area. The welcome mat was always extended to all musicians at Blake’s apartment at 31st and Grove Avenue, and a steady flow of blues and good times heightened Blake’s performances which included appearances by Blind Lemon Jefferson, Little Brother Montgomery and Barbeque Bob. As with his beginnings in Florida, details concerning Blake’s last days are shrouded in mystery. In all likelihood the Florida bluesman recorded up to the time of his death with his last recording appearing in the 1940s. A compilation of testimonials regarding his demise describes Blake’s end in a violent context, perhaps in an unfortunate streetcar accident. Blind Blake honed the elements of his style in Florida but displayed them before a national audience.

So too did Tampa Red, another nationally famous rural blues player. Hudson Whittaker took his professional name from the city in which he developed his identity as a blues musician. Born in Smithville, Georgia, on January 8, 1903, Whittaker migrated to Florida following the death of his parents. While growing up, the reddish haired youth toted his guitar around Tampa’s streets, sharpening his abilities at every opportunity. Eventually, nearly everyone associated the name Tampa Red with the tag “Guitar Wizard,” as he was sometimes billed. He developed a unique finger-picking style combined with a deft use of slide on one of the earliest electric guitars. Eager to perform, the traveling bluesman honed his rhythm and blues stylings in night spots along Tampa’s Nebraska and Central Avenues, as well as in the Sulphur Springs area. Tampa Red also spent time in the rough jook joints of neighboring Polk County both as a performer and patron.
Tampa Red departed Florida in the mid-twenties to travel with the Theater Owners’ Booking Agency, through which he met Georgia Tom Dorsey. The duo successfully combined their talents on such hit recordings as “Tight Like That.” In the thirties the itinerant musician traveled the same path as Blind Blake by becoming a part of the Chicago house-rent-party entourage. Close friendships developed among all the musicians, and one of Tampa Red’s closest friends was Big Bill Broonzy, one of the great country blues guitarists who later drew high compliments from artists as diverse as Muddy Waters and the Beatles.

Broonzy’s description of his blues playing friend sketches Tampa Red as a quiet and kind individual, who for the most part possessed an even temper which at times could flare into heated confrontations. Any violent outbursts, however, were overshadowed by a friendly and humorous disposition. Big Bill Broonzy recalled one event which, although not seeming humorous at the time, elicited laughter from both Broonzy and Tampa Red once the whole affair was over. After returning empty handed from a fishing excursion, Tampa Red tried to fool his wife with a store-bought fish. Broonzy expressed his own apprehension by recalling: “I stayed at the door so I wouldn’t have far to go when she got mad, because she was a strong woman. He knew it and I did too, because she had thrown us out before.” As the fuse of Tampa Red’s wife’s temper shortened, the fearful duo made a hasty retreat down the stairs and out the door, laughing about their narrow escape over drinks.  

Florida’s Tampa Red experienced the unfortunate yet similar fate of other bluesmen across the country. Song agents and promoters cheated and double-crossed the trusting guitarist leaving him little of his royalties. Like his friend Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red rode the crest of blues popularity in Europe during the 1960s, but again financial rewards failed to equal his popularity. Also like fellow Floridian Blind Blake, Tampa Red passed away in obscurity, reportedly in a Texas nursing home during the seventies.

The names Blind Blake and Tampa Red represent the only two Florida bluesmen on nationally selling commercial records of the pre-World War II era. However, a lack of recordings on the part of Floridian blues artists does not make the music an unknowable entity. Other southern areas, rich in black music traditions, were similarly bypassed by talent scouts on recording expeditions.

Fortunately, the work and life of Zora Neale Hurston, the black author who grew up in the all-black community of Eatonville near Orlando, captured the essence of black Florida communities. Hurston’s work celebrated the social lives of blacks, largely unwritten about at the time, revealing the intimate relationship blues music had with the community. Nowhere did the blues have a greater or more prominent voice than in the jook joints of rural Florida.

Zora Neale Hurston translated her experiences amidst local black communities like Eatonville into the 1942 work *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Hurston ably reconstructed her experiences into vivid images of sweaty jook nights.

Polk County. After dark, the jooks. Songs are born out of feelings with an old beat up piano, or a guitar for a midwife. Love made and unmade. . . Dancing the square dance. Dancing the scronch. Dancing the belly-rub. Knocking the right hat off the wrong head.
and backing it up with a switch-blade. . . And the night, the pay night rocks on with music and gambling and laughter and dancing and fights.⁸

Untangling the origins of the word “jook” (or “juke”) presents a difficult task, but descriptions and definitions appear vividly and readily. In *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston described a jook as “a fun house, where they sing, dance, gamble, love, and compose ‘blues’ songs incidentally.”⁹ Usually no bigger than a small room, the jook appealed to workers in rural areas, such as sawmill camps, who regarded the jook as an oasis in the middle of vast toil and monotony. Patrons might crowd onto a dance floor made of wooden planks or perhaps bare ground, moving against the other bodies as the aroma of fried fish, beer and barbeque whetted appetites and the sound of a beat up, boogie woogie piano moved the dancers around the floor.

Free flowing liquor did little to advance Florida jooks as centers of wholesome virtue, and many activities under their roofs accented their less than spotless reputations. Often jooks hired girls to dance with customers, and after a few drinks and a dance or two, the girl might lead the customer to a nearby car or cottage. Jooks of this nature were known as “Long Houses,” which Zora Neale Hurston described as “A long low building cut into rooms that all open on a common porch. A woman lives in each of the rooms.”¹⁰ Obviously, blues music was not the featured attraction at a long house jook. The lure of sexual liaisons and the comfort of cold beer and strong whiskey invited some blacks while others avoided the bluesy refuges. A group of blacks from Cross City, calling themselves the Dixie Harmony Four, assured Stetson Kennedy in 1939 that “don’t nobody go there but outlaw people.” Nevertheless, Zora Neale Hurston confessed in 1934, “Musically speaking, the jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues, and on blues has been founded jazz.”¹²

The “Laura Lee” was typical of the jook joints that could be found all over the South.

Photograph from *The Story of the Blues* by Paul Oliver.
In the late thirties jook patrons crowded the piano as the first rumblings of favorites such as “Pine-Top’s Boogie-Woogie” livened up the evening. Many customers joined in at their favorite parts, encouraging the performer to play all night. Crowd-drawing piano players might make enough money putting in all nighters at camps, such as Barker’s near Lakeland, that day jobs would be unnecessary. Beating his feet on the piano pedals for a percussive effect, the accomplished jook musician could keep couples dancing the belly-rub all night, thereby guaranteeing more food ordered, more liquor purchased and more blues wailing throughout the evening.¹³

Live entertainment lured crowds to jooks for nightly dancing, but the phonograph proved equally popular. Benny’s Place, a jook in Hernando County, located four and a half miles northeast of Brooksville at the Camp Concrete Company Settlement, offered a nickel phonograph to its patrons with a selection of twelve recordings. Among the selections in May 1937, a customer could choose “The Nashville Blues,” “Kind Hearted Women,” “The Kidnapper Blues,” “Blue and Evil,” “Rattlesnake Daddy” or “Drinking My Blues Away.”¹⁴ Patrons arriving in front of Benny’s Place were notified by a sign which announced, “Every Tuesday nite is Ball Nite – Everybody come.” Such invitations promised a special evening of moonshine, fish and barbequed meats, mixed with dancing favorites such as Tampa Red on the phonograph machine.

The nickel phonograph had a big impact on the blues music of Florida, and recordings such as “Pine-Top’s Boogie-Woogie” and “Mistreating Blues” achieved incredible popularity. Vocal recordings, as opposed to instrumental compositions, found a particularly enthusiastic response in rural areas, where jooks enlivened the surroundings. Whether the location was in Tampa, Orlando, Sanford or Perry, many of the most popular songs were lyrically changed to satisfy local tastes. One example came in a version of “Troubled in Mind,” sung by some tie-choppers in a jook near Palatka:
I’m gonna lay my head
Out yonder on that railroad line,
Just to feel that Special
Running ’cross my mind.
My yeller gal done quit me,
And my mind is in a mess;
I try to sleep at night
But my heart won’t let me rest.  

Such revisions underscore the link between blues music and the personal lives of blacks throughout Florida. The altered lyrics, molded by the details of black Floridian lives, voiced the emotions and concerns of those within the community.

The notoriety of a good many reoccurring songs in jook joints throughout the state illustrates the relevance of their subject matter to daily situations. Under the auspices of the Federal Writer’s Project in 1939, folklorist Stetson Kennedy questioned members of the Dixie Harmony Four about jook joint numbers. In an office in Cross City in Dixie County, the quartet, made up of black males ranging in age from twenty to thirty, mentioned a jook song known as “Poor Stranger Blues.” While the quartet mainly performed at churches and parties, they were familiar enough with the composition to recall a few lines from it.

I’m a stranger here,
Jus blown in-to town ...
I’m a stranger here,
Jus blown in-to town ...
Some people like high yellers,
But gimme my black and brown. . .

The Dixie Harmony Four remembered hearing this song in jook joints of Perry, Florida, and throughout Suwanee County. The popularity and wide performance of “Poor Stranger Blues” indicate a strong identification with migratory travel, perhaps the steady journeys of working through the lumber and phosphate camps. As well, the final lines highlight a consciousness of skin color among blacks in the state.

Polk County inspired one of the most popular songs in the state – “Polk County Blues.” In her 1935 book, *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston reported that Charlie Jones sent her to Bartow and Lakeland in her quest for folk material. With a hint of disbelief, Jones inquired of Hurston, “Ain’t you never hea’d dat in Polk County de water drink lak cherry wine?” For the most part, the song’s numerous verses describe experiences in the labor camps of Polk County.

I got up this morning, and I knowed I didn't want it.
Yea! Polk County!
You don't know Polk County like I do.
Anybody been there, tell you the same thing, too.
Eh, rider, rider!
Polk County, where the water taste like cherry wine.
A subsequent verse voiced despair over and dissatisfaction with the wandering life of the labor camp worker, while citing Tampa as a more desirable location.

Ruther be in Tampa
With the whip-poor-will
Than to be ’round here –
Honey with a hundred dollar bill.19

While despair or loneliness may have resided in some of the blues songs popular in Florida, others commemorated the good times. One in particular celebrated the virtues of Ella Wall, known as the queen of love in the jooks of Polk County. Zora Neale Hurston illustrated one of her many experiences on a bluesy Saturday night in a humming jook. “Over at the Florida-Flip game somebody began to sing that jook tribute to Ella Wall which has been sung in every jook and on every single ‘job’ in South Florida.” Hurston embellished her description by providing two verses from the jook tribute.

Go to Ella Wall
Oh, go to Ella Wall
If you want good boody
Oh, go to Ella Wall.
Oh, she’s long and tall
Oh, she’s long and tall
And she rocks her rider
From uh wall to wall.20

Not all of Zora Neale Hurston’s contributions in uncovering Florida blues appeared in literary form. In 1935 she accompanied Alan Lomax southward on a folklore collecting trip. Alan Lomax and his father, John, proved to be pivotal figures in blues history. Together they brought the legendary Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter out of a Texas penitentiary and preserved his raw talent on record. Years later, the Lomax instinct brought Muddy Waters in Mississippi to the rest of the music world. The success of the collecting trips in Florida rested on Hurston’s immediate and easy access to small rural communities. Trips to Belle Glade and Chosen in June 1935 yielded the recording of migrant workers Booker T. Sapps, Roger Matthews and Willy Flowers. Sapp’s train imitation workout on the harmonica accompanied another blues harmonica standard by Matthews entitled “Fox and Hounds.” Willy Flower’s slide guitar performance highlighted the rendering of “Levee Camp Holler.” The combination of all three musicians’ talents on one song offered results which blues expert Bruce Bastin called “One of the finest small jook bands ever to be documented.”21

Through Hurston, Lomax uncovered talent which he felt rivaled blues legends of the day. Ozella Jones, discovered on the State Farm in Raiford and whose “holler” singing style reflected the residual influence of the field holler in rural Florida, prompted Lomax to place her talent above that of Bessie Smith.22 In a similar vein, witnessing the talents of Gabriel Brown in Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville prompted Lomax to call Brown “the finest Negro guitarist I have heard so far, better even than Leadbelly although of a slightly different breed.”23 Brown vindicated Lomax’s accolades by moving to New York, where in 1943 his playing still retained
Zora Neale Hurston listening to Rochelle French and Gabriel Brown in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, during June 1935.

Photograph from *Zora Neale Hurston* by Robert E. Hemenway.

Zora Neale Hurston at a Federal Writers’ Project book exhibit in 1938.

Photograph from *Zora Neale Hurston* by Robert E. Hemenway.
its Florida roots. Indeed, Brown’s last release in 1952 featured a traditional country blues number despite the increasing popularity of urban blues styles. He later returned to Florida, where he was reportedly killed in a boating accident in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{24}

Hurston and Lomax recorded their many discoveries in 1935, and their efforts materialized into a significant compilation album, entitled \textit{Boot That Thing}. Without this important fieldwork the existence of these Florida blues musicians and their performances would have gone unrecognized. \textit{Boot That Thing} looms especially large in music history due to the scarce amount of Florida blues on commercial recordings. Furthermore, several decades of national blues popularity would pass by before any collecting would be undertaken again in Florida.\textsuperscript{25}

The work of Zora Neale Hurston and her contributions to understanding black folk life make clear that recordings may not serve as the well upon which to draw information about Florida blues, but more localized and unwritten sources do provide insight. Many aging blues musicians and singers now live in obscurity in southern communities, never performing and giving no clue as to their early activities. The examples of individuals who presently reside in Florida highlight the low profile of blues music in the state; yet they confirm its glorious past, its vibrant present and its assured future.

The moniker “Washboard Bill Cooke” suggests the instrument upon which William Abercook staked his reputation, but it does little to reflect the colorful past of the blues musician who grew up in DuPont, Florida, a sawmill village where a jook joint was his first home. Located on the east coast, about fifty miles from St. Augustine, the DuPont of Bill Cooke’s youth possessed one of the largest sawmills in the United States. With rural isolation defining the borders of the village, the weekends were ignited by the excitement of the local joint, which during the week hummed only with the activities of the Abercook family. A converging of circumstances determined that the Abercook household would double as the local jook joint, where the sounds of blues music proved a leading attraction. In the camps, the biggest families resided in the largest house, so that the ten-room house came to the Abercook family by virtue of Bill’s many brothers and sisters. His father went by the name Jabber Abercook, but the boy really only knew his stepfather who treated Bill like a son. The Abercook household represented the only social center for the weekend, and when Friday evening arrived, the entire area came out for a big party. The sawmill workers received their pay once a month, while those farming in the area enjoyed a weekly salary, but together they all flocked to the weekend festivities of the jook house which acquired the name “Nit and Jenny’s.” Everyone arriving at the jook expected a great time as Bill’s smiling stepfather invited everyone to play the southern card game known as the Skin Game. While his stepfather dealt the cards, Bill’s mother cooked up a delicious dinner for the hungry crowd.\textsuperscript{26}

Jook night may have been eagerly anticipated by the laborers who were ready for a night of socializing after a week of hard work, but for the Abercook children it simply meant an earlier bedtime than usual. Bill, the oldest male of the children, circumvented the curfew by crawling out of bed and quietly peeping through a knothole in the door to watch the men and women dancing the belly-rub and the boogie-woogie. The dancers coordinated their movements to the percussion of someone shaking a tambourine made out of beer can tops or to an individual pounding out a blues rhythm on a piano. Usually the dancing continued uninterrupted until a
voice called out, “Ladies and Gents, get in a circle,” which signalled the beginning of a dance called the “Buck ’n Wing.” Many of the movements in this dancing resurfaced generations later in break dancing, according to Bill Cooke, thereby indicating its cultural longevity.

Washboard Bill’s curiosity placed him at the teetering edge of a possible confrontation with his parents, but Bill kept a watchful eye and an alert ear on the evening’s escapades so that he might relay all the details to the area children on the following day. Once the punctuations of dancing feet, highpitched laughter and competing voices died down, young Abercook hastily jumped in his bed and feigned snoring, knowing that his parents would soon pass by his room on their way to retiring for the evening. On the following day an enraptured young audience of boys and girls congregated behind the house to view a repeat performance of the previous evening’s jook dancing.

Unlike many blues musicians, Washboard Bill never actually entered the arena of performance during his childhood years. Instead, he actively participated in the musical culture around him and built up a wide range of personal experiences which he would later integrate into his musical style. Through his teens and up to his midtwenties, Washboard Bill remained close to the area of his birth and worked a variety of odd jobs in order to help his family. While “Nit and Jenny’s” served as the main social spot for several years, other establishments took its place once the sawmill changed owners and a new family occupied the big house. With the closing of “Nit and Jenny’s” came the arrival of new jooks in the outlying areas. “Cooters” and “Shullers” joined the roll call of south Florida jooks, and they quickly grew in popularity in the absence of the Abercook’s nightlife haven. For the most part, the names of jook establishments sprang from the names of their operators. However, this was not a hard-and-fast rule, as Bill Cooke happily remembered a place named “The House of Joy,” a regularly frequented blues establishment, run by a woman known as Fanny. On a Friday or Saturday night it was unusual not to hear someone say, “Let’s go jookin.” Under the roofs of places like “Cooters,” “Shullers” and “The House of Joy,” couples danced the belly-rub and the Lindy hop to a steady blues rhythm.

By his twenties Washboard Bill yearned to see the rest of the country. So in 1931 he set out on the path of hoboing, committed to acquiring “an education that money can’t buy.” What he got was a treasure of experiences to incorporate later into his music. One vivid recollection came from a train which he hopped in Jacksonville bound for River Junction, Florida, where he saw his first hobo jungle. He later stopped in Pennsylvania and killed chickens for one family in
exchange for food. He built up a reputation in the neighborhood, and many people would urge their friends to “Come see the Florida Chicken Killer.” His years of hoboing ended in 1941 when he returned to the life of steady employment. New York City in 1946 found him working in a bar, where a lone musician impressed him with a performance on a washboard. Following this experience he constructed his own instrument and set off on a new course where he could express himself in music. From that point on, the Floridian became known as Washboard Bill Cooke.

In 1955 the adeptness of Bill Cooke’s washboard skills captured the attention of folk artist Pete Seeger, whom Cooke fondly describes as “a real human being.” Their mutual admiration led them to include a third party, the twelvestring blues performer Brownie McGee. Not surprisingly the end result of this collaboration contained strong, traditional rural elements. As a part of this ensemble the washboard playing of Florida’s Bill Cooke found an audience with the release of Folkways Records’ *Washboard Country Dance Music*. Washboard Bill Cooke now lives in West Palm Beach, Florida, and he continues to play his washboard for interested crowds.27 However, his music is not represented on commercial recordings, and he remains an obscure figure in blues music, offering more insight into the little known aspects of jooks in Florida, as opposed to actual blues music in the state.

No individual better represents the low profile of blues performers in Florida than the dynamic Mary McClain. Having never recorded, she is today relatively unknown outside this state, but those who have witnessed her performances are enthusiastic in their praise. Until 1981 few of her neighbors in Manatee County’s Palmetto knew that she had ever been a performer. Yet, once her rediscovery became public knowledge, Mary McClain drew large crowds to her infrequent but powerful live engagements in Tampa, Bradenton, St. Petersburg and Miami. Despite years away from the spotlight she continues, even at more than eighty years of age, to be one of the most exciting blues singers in the state of Florida.

Mary McClain ran away from the coal mining country of Huntington, West Virginia, where she was born in 1902. Once several miles separated her from Huntington’s Logan County, she joined the traveling Rabbit Foot Minstrel Show, where the initial role of chorus girl turned into that of star singer. A long career of traveling in show business brought her into association with such names as Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole and B.B. King. By 1944 Mary McClain, or “Diamond Teeth Mary” as she became known due to the alleged diamonds she once wore in her teeth, performed before large crowds on the traveling circuit. While fame came rapidly, careless money management left her little to show for her success.28

Mary McClain promised her husband that she would retire from performing when she reached the age of sixty. In 1962 she honored her promise when a trip to Florida resulted in a permanent move to Bradenton in Manatee County. The blues world appeared nothing more than a memory when she joined and became active in a local church. The former crowd-drawing entertainer slipped into the obscurity of a neighborhood which had no idea who she was. Her church’s view of blues as the devil’s music kept her from returning to the stage in spite of continuing financial problems.29
In 1981 researchers from the Smithsonian Institute and the Florida Folk Arts Program stumbled across McClain in Bradenton. With some prodding, she accepted their invitation to return to the stage at the American Folk Festival at Wolf Trap in Washington, D.C. Her return debut preceded an appearance at the Florida Folk Festival in White Springs. At eighty years of age, Mary McClain stunned the crowds, with her electrifying performance the highlight of both programs. Since her comeback, she has made appearances in St. Petersburg and in Tampa, as well as a much heralded engagement in Miami. In addition, she proudly possesses a collection of European newspaper articles which describe and pictorialize her brief 1985 stint across the sea. The Florida Folk Heritage Award recognized her talent in 1986.

Diamond Teeth Mary continues to give an occasional performance, and announcements of her appearances consistently draw devoted fans who thrill to her impassioned performances of “St. Louis Blues” and other standards. Presently she resides in rural Palmetto amid rows of one- and two-room houses which are indistinguishable at night due to a lack of street lights. Financial problems continue to trouble her, but she is entirely uninterested in doing any recordings.
she to accede to a recording session, she would likely gain a place in blues history. Despite performing infrequently and never recording, Mary McClain continues to be one of the most enduring and popular blues performers in the state of Florida.

Noble “Thin Man” Watts and his recent return to recording and performing make him a prime example of the relatively unknown character of blues music in Florida. An east coast Floridian by birth, Noble Watts has ridden the entire gamut of experiences in blues music: from rough-and-tumble jook joints in countless rural areas throughout the state, into national exposure with bigname tour packages and a number-one record on the Rhythm and Blues Chart, back to seeming obscurity in Florida and then onto once again displaying his saxophone skills on record and before avid blues audiences. His life and music go a long way toward fine tuning the details of Florida blues.

The small town of Deland, Florida, located between bustling Orlando and the sandy beaches of Daytona, is home to both Stetson University and to Noble Watts. When the thirties had only just begun, five-year-old Noble had already become interested in the piano. Musical activity characterized his early years up through high school until he eventually arrived with his saxophone in Tampa. There the ever-eager saxophonist crossed paths with Tampa native and jazz great Cannonball Adderley who, along with future Duke Ellington collaborator Herbert Jones, convinced Watts to attend Florida A&M University. Alongside Cannonball and Nat Adderley, Watts performed in Florida A&M’s marching band.32

By 1945 Noble Watts, college-educated and ever improving on his instrument, toured with an extremely popular Florida blues band known as the Honeydippers. This ensemble of Florida bluesmen blazed through countless one-night stands up and down the state. Just a brief glimpse of their exploits illustrates further the nature of the Florida blues scene while at the same time reinforcing the point that high visibility does not characterize the history of blues in Florida.

When the Honeydippers arrived with instruments ready in a city like Tampa, they headed for the areas where blues reigned supreme. Central Avenue sparked the night life of black Tampa, and the din of its activity echoed across the rows of clubs for blocks. If the rhythm and blues hot spots along Central Avenue proved unsatisfactory, a popular club on Nebraska Avenue, known as the Board, offered patrons the option of drinking downstairs on the first floor or joining the dancing couples upstairs at the Blue Moon ballroom.
Orlando also lured blues bands to perform their sets at the Quarterback Club and the Sunshine Club. The Sunshine Club featured another blues-influenced entertainer from Florida – Ray Charles. With similar schedules of playing up and down the coast of Florida, it was inevitable that the path of Noble Watts and the Honeydippers would cross with that of Ray Charles.

Watts vividly recalled the day in Jacksonville when the Honeydippers needed a piano player for their next few performances. The answer to their dilemma came in the form of Ray Charles. “I remember Ray Charles standing in short pants in the musicians’ union office in Jacksonville,” Watts reminisced. “He told the leader of the Honeydippers, Charlie Blantley, that he could play.” Consequently, Charles, whom Watts described as a carbon copy of Nat King Cole at the time, filled in on piano whenever necessary, be it in Orlando or Tampa.

When Charles left Florida for Seattle, he set out on the course which would make him a legend, while Noble Watts remained with the Honeydippers, solidifying their reputation throughout the state. While the big city clubs drew large crowds, they did not guarantee much money for musicians, so that the Honeydippers made frequent stops at jook joints throughout Florida.

Hillsborough County offered saxophonist Watts his first jook joint encounter in Plant City’s tiny Shell Road Inn. The entire area measured no larger than a small room, and it had a sand floor. A small stand had been constructed in the corner, offering barbequed foods and beer and wine. With a capacity for no more than fifty people, it came as no surprise that when a blues band set up for the evening, people stood shoulder to shoulder with much of the overflow gathering outside. As the Honeydippers entered the Shell Road Inn, Watts disbelievingly surveyed the area as he walked through the door. Surprised yet unsure, Watts asked of Charlie Blantley, “We’re going to play here?” Band leader Blantley whirled around on the sandy floor and replied with a resounding “Yes.” Despite his initial hesitancy, Watts blew his saxophone with all his energy for the transitory clientele who came and went throughout the night. Jooks became a mainstay of the Honeydipper’s itinerary, with rural joints in Palatka, Sanford and Miami welcoming Watt’s honking saxophone. Fast and at times frantic schedules of playing successive jook dates may have presented less than ideal conditions, but Noble Watts recalled those nights as “fun and good experience.”

The combination of honing their skills in clubs like Jacksonville’s Two Spot and perfecting the excitement of the live shows in Plant City’s Shell Road Inn formed the Honeydippers into one of the most popular blues bands in the state. Famous musicians often highlighted the evening by arriving either to jam or to convince the Honeydippers to move to a big city like New York. Unfortunately, the Honeydippers never reached an audience outside their own state, partly due to the fact that they recorded only two or three sides for the Deluxe record label out of Miami. Today these few recordings are so rare that not even Noble Watts owns them. The saxophonist surmised that had the band done more records, and thereby toured behind them, the Honeydippers would have been an extremely popular item on a nationwide scale. The Honeydippers’ one-time popularity around the state, followed by their relative obscurity, attests to the limited impact which Florida blues made on the national scene in many cases, but it confirms the music’s existence and its role in the social life of black Floridians. While Noble Watts may regret the Honeydippers’ lack of national acclaim, his own personal fame came in the fifties.
In 1957 Noble Watts’ experiences on the road placed him in New York City for a time. With Jimmy Spool, a guitarist from the Carolinas, Watts put together a band whose members seemed to click as a group. The Deland native’s honking saxophone propelled the group onto touring shows with the likes of Ruth Brown, Fats Domino and Chuck Berry. Watts and guitarist Spool harnessed the high level of creative energy amongst them by coming up with a song entitled “Hard Times.” The duo procured a label for their band’s effort, and in 1957 “Hard Times,” on the Baton label, headed for the number one slot on the Rhythm and Blues Chart.

Segregation inspired Watts and Spool to write “Hard Times.” Personal experience also helped them write a follow up hit, entitled “Jukin,” which sprang from Watts’ remembrance of countless Saturday nights when friends would tell him “Let’s go jooking.”

Watts continued to perform, even at New York’s legendary Apollo theater in the 1960s, but matching the popularity of “Hard Times” proved a difficult task. He eventually moved back to Deland, Florida. For a time, the days of performing and recording blues music appeared to be a part of the past. However, the eighties brought Watts together with a white blues band known as the Midnight Creepers, thereby returning Noble “Thin Man” Watts to the Florida blues scene.33
Emigrating southward from Chicago, the Midnight Creepers based themselves in the Deland-Daytona area of Volusia County, and together with Watts’ legendary saxophone they have turned in smoldering performances throughout the state. Collectively, Watts and the Midnight Creepers have issued an album entitled *Daytona Blues* on Deland-based Kingsnake Records. Among the high points of this effort stands the unmistakable tenor sax of Watts’ fifties smashes “Jukin” and “Hard Times,” both re-recorded for *Daytona Blues*. Kingsnake Records simultaneously captured the driving intensity of Noble Watts’ blues artistry on his triumphant return to vinyl with the aptly titled *Return of the Thin Man*. Watts exhibits particular pride over this album which he feels is strengthened by its blending of various blues and jazz styles. The saxophone solo on Watts’ original piece “Confusion” particularly pleases Deland’s rhythm and blues legend, who believes that the track will keep him in step with the times through its appeal to younger music listeners.

When asked recently if Chicago Blues or the Delta sound had a counterpart in Florida, the veteran bluesman replied that the state never really had its own sound. However, the performer of nearly four decades cited *Daytona Blues* as the result of Watts’ and the Midnight Creepers efforts to create what he called “Florida Swamp Blues.” Watts’ background and ability, joined by the spontaneity and modern influence of the Midnight Creepers, offers both recorded and live evidence of the continuing influence of blues music in the state of Florida.

A history of Florida blues music emphasizes the element of migrating people and oral traditions. Deep roots in folklore, as opposed to widespread existence on commercial recordings, characterize a good part of its formative years. Zora Neale Hurston’s writings, memories of raucous good times in rural jook joints and noncommercial field recordings provide a keyhole through which to view Florida blues music. Such sources point toward understanding the music’s existence within the rarely documented aspects of personal lives, specifically in black communities. By focusing on local individuals, some who teeter on the edge of obscurity, one discovers a rich past for Florida blues. Droves of avid blues aficionados who flock to performances by blues queens like Mary McClain confirm the music’s contemporary vibrancy in Tampa or St. Petersburg, just as in years when it lured people to remote jook joints. Continued high energy performances by musicians like Noble Watts insure that this contribution to American culture will continue to flourish in Florida. Despite any previous conceptions, Florida is a state of sand, sun and rhythm and blues.

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1 Dwight Devane, “Record Notes,” *Drop on Down in Florida* (Florida Folklife Recording, 1981), 5.


5 Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 68-69.

6 Oliver, *Story of the Blues*, 100.


11 Stetson Kennedy, “Record 7” (typescript), Florida Federal Writers’ Project Papers (1939), University of South Florida Special Collections, 2.


13 Martin Richardson, “Folklore and Custom – Florida” (typescript), Florida Federal Writers’ Project Papers (May 18, 1937), University of South Florida Special Collections, 7-8.

14 Ibid., 7-13.

15 Ibid., 5-6.

16 Kennedy, “Record 7.”


18 Ibid., 189.

19 Ibid., 19-20.

20 Ibid., 158-59.


22 Ibid., 60-61.

23 Ibid., 54-55.

24 Ibid., 330-31.

25 Ibid., 58.

26 Washboard Bill Cooke, Telephone interviews (August 18-19, 1987).

27 Ibid.

28 Mary McClain, Personal interview (March 6, 1987).

29 Ibid.


31 McClain, Personal interview.

32 Noble Watts, Telephone interview (April 6, 1987).

33 Ibid.

Watts, Telephone interview.