



**AFRICAN
AMERICAN
LEGACY
RECORDINGS**

cephas&wiggins
richmond blues



**NATIONAL MUSEUM of
AFRICAN AMERICAN
HISTORY and CULTURE**



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1. Richmond Blues 3:57 (Arr. John Cephas-Phil Wiggins / John Cephas Inc., ASCAP)
2. Going to the River 5:02 (Antoine Domino-Dave Bartholomew / EMI UNART Catalog Inc., BMI)
3. Keep Your Hands Off My Baby 3:58 (William Broonzy / ARC Music Corp.)
4. Black Rat Swing 3:32 (Minnie Lawlers / Memphis Minnie Music Co.)
5. Mamie 4:10 (Fulton Allen)
6. Crow Jane 3:01 (Arr. Carl Martin / Testament Music, BMI)
7. Dog Days of August 4:09 (Phil Wiggins / John Cephas Inc., ASCAP)
8. John Henry 5:36
9. Pigmeat Crave 3:32 (Fulton Allen)
10. Prison Bound Blues 5:21 (Fulton Allen)
11. Key to the Highway 3:25
12. Going Down the Road Feeling Bad 3:35
(Bill Broonzy-Charles Segar / Songs of Universal Inc., BMI)
13. Careless Love 5:48
14. Great Change 3:47 (Gary Davis / Chankdos Music, ASCAP)
15. Reno Factor 3:16
16. Step It Up and Go 2:57



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

*This recording is part of the **African American Legacy Recordings** series, co-produced with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.*

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“The blues we play was born in the black community, out in the country, at house parties and country breakdowns where people would get together and dance all night long. This is black folk music, but it’s also all of our music. It’s an American tradition. Today, anybody can learn the blues; but for me it’s part of my heritage, it’s in my blood.”

—John Cephas

RICHMOND BLUES

Barry Lee Pearson

John Cephas and Phil Wiggins are today's best-known practitioners of the Piedmont blues tradition, having toured the world from the White House in Washington, D.C., to Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, North and South America. They have won friends for themselves and converts for the music they champion. Their acoustic guitar/harmonica duet sound sets them apart from the electric band format that dominates contemporary blues. Bolstered by a firm belief in the value of their heritage, they are committed to keeping their tradition in the public eye, and to this end they are performers, teachers, and cultural advocates who have successfully shepherded Piedmont blues into the 21st century.

John Cephas grew up in the Foggy Bottom area of Washington, D.C., at the time a predominantly black neighborhood that was, as he recalls, a close-knit community held together by an extended support system of family and friends. His first music lessons began at home when he was eight and his mother coached him and his brother, Ernest, to sing gospel duets at their Baptist church. He remembers these sometimes grueling sessions as "...the cutting of the teeth on how to do it." Along with these church performances he would participate in family song fests, experiences that honed his skills as a performing musician and led him as a young adult to join a professional gospel quartet,

the Capitol Harmonizers, who toured throughout the Southeast. Today he still performs a wide range of religious material, seeing no harm in playing both blues and gospel.

Cephas' initial exposure to blues also took place around age eight by way of his aunt, Lillian Douglas, who played guitar and gave him his first lessons. Moreover, she had a boyfriend, Haley Dorsey, who was a blues player and further sparked Cephas' interest in guitar and blues. His father also had aspirations to learn guitar:

My father bought a guitar, so at that time I had already been exposed to the blues. I was actually playing a little bit of open-key stuff and slide that he didn't know anything about. So he bought himself a guitar and he used to hide it in the closet and wouldn't allow me to touch it. But every time that he would leave, I'd go to the closet and get his guitar and I'd play it; almost every time he would inevitably catch me or know that I had been fooling with it and give me a licking over it. So one day I had been after his guitar again, and he just told me, "Well, I can't stop you, and I'm getting tired of whipping you. It don't look like I'm ever going to be able to play it, so I'm going to give it to you. Here's the guitar if you want to play it." That gave me a chance to play it as much as I wanted after he almost killed me trying to keep me from playing it.

Besides his mother, father, and aunt, other family members provided musical direction. First there was his grandfather, John Dudley:

When I was young, he used to come around the house in Foggy Bottom and say, "Hey, boy, come on. I'm going down the road; I want to take you with

me." We used to go down in Virginia. My grandfather used to take us down to the country together and show us all about where our roots were; show me, my cousins, our home place and where he was born. He also showed me about music. He used to play the guitar and he played the piano; but he played left-handed guitar, so it was kind of hard to learn anything on the guitar from him. But I can still remember some of the tunes he used to play, and I play some of them still. Yeah, he was the kind of guy that introduced me to all those things: corn liquor, music, country parties, and all those good times. I would go down where they were playing the blues and dancing. It just came naturally to me. Blues drew me like a magnet; it was part of me, part of my heritage, part of my soul.

While his grandfather introduced him to the blues lifestyle, his Virginia cousin, David Talliaferro, became his mentor and musical partner:

I had a cousin named David Talliaferro who was a great influence on me. He was six or seven years older than me, and he was one hell of a guitar player. I'll tell you the truth, David was the best guitar player around...the best in Caroline County, Virginia, maybe all of Virginia. Didn't nobody fool around with David Talliaferro; but he was just a country boy and never got exposure. He really taught me a lot—I'd say eighty percent of what I know on the guitar. He just played those raw blues, taught me to play the thumb-and-finger style like the other Piedmont guitar players do. David and I kind of teamed up, and we would go around together on the weekends and

play at parties or just about any affair on that house-to-house circuit. It was mostly just two guitars, and he sang and I sang. We did that for quite awhile, almost every weekend. And the more I played, the better I got. Then I had another cousin, John Woolfork, and sometimes he would go around and play with us. And he had a sister who could play, too, and she used to give house parties.

After years of playing on the house party circuit, John grew physically tired of the all-night parties, and put music aside to concentrate on family, and work.

Drinking and staying up all night long kind of got to me after awhile. We would play those old juke joints and be on the road all the weekend going from place to place, and I got tired of that. And then there was the headaches from some of those bad weekends when you drink too much. So, I just gave up playing the guitar altogether. I didn't want to play any more music; I didn't want to play guitar for about five or six years. As a matter of fact, I played at a party one night and left my guitar, and I didn't go back to get it. That was in the late '60s. Then one night I went out to a birthday party, a girlfriend invited me to this party. I hadn't played for long time, so I went there, but I didn't take a guitar. There was a guy she introduced me to; his name was Big Chief Ellis. She introduced us and told me that he was a well-known blues piano player, and she told him, "Chief, John plays the guitar." So we started talking, and I said, "What kind of music you play?" He said,

"I play the blues." I said, "I play the blues, too." So he and I just started talking and what have you. He asked would I like to play with him sometimes, and I told him I didn't mind, and we exchanged phone numbers.

Chief Ellis rekindled Cephas' interest in performing and also introduced him to the blues and folk festival circuit that had developed during the Folk Revival of the 1960s. Then, in 1976 while playing at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., Cephas and Ellis met Phil Wiggins:

I was telling Chief, "Man, the way that guy plays that harp we ought to try and talk him into coming and joining us." So Chief says, "Yeah, we ought to do it." So we asked Phil would he join in with us and play with us, so Phil agreed. Then we started off with a group called the Barrelhouse Rockers. It was four of us: Chief, James Bellamy on bass, Phil on harmonica, and me on the guitar. I guess we played together until, I think it was 1977. Chief had a heart attack down in Birmingham, down in his home. He went home, I guess for his final rest.

Cephas and Wiggins determined to carry on as a duo. At first performing was secondary to their day jobs; sometimes they made a little money, sometimes not. But the more they played, the better they got, until the blues business began to take notice.

Phil Wiggins was born in Washington, D.C., and except for spending part of his childhood overseas on military bases, has made D.C. and the surrounding suburbs his home. Like most great harmonica players, he is essentially self-taught:

When I first started playing harmonica, the only harp player that I'd really heard of was Sonny Terry. My mother had a couple of Sonny Terry albums, and I listened to a little of his stuff. A couple of years later I heard of Little Walter from Chicago, and he really influenced me. Then later on Sonny Boy Williamson. Mainly, you know, I just drew from people that I'd jam with on a person-to-person basis. I learned as much from guitar players and piano, even more than other harp players. My first person-to-person influence was Flora Molton. She [was] a street singer in D.C., and I'd been seeing her all my life. Then when I was a freshman in high school, I went out to her house one day with a friend of mine and started jamming with her. When I got into harmonica, it was just something I wanted to play. I wanted to get involved in it, and it just happened.... I always liked the saxophone and the harmonica; I think they have a similar kind of sound and range. I always liked the way the harmonica could be so expressive. It works almost as a voice. You know, you can shape sound almost like your voice, so it's directly hooked up to your feelings and your emotions, and I think that's why it really appealed to me. I could just express myself almost the way, like I said, a person would use their voice.

Alongside his harmonica credentials, Wiggins is also a very prolific songwriter with numerous publications to his credit, including “Dog Days of August,” “Roberta,” and “Guitar Man,” to name a few. His songs often explore contemporary subjects, showing his



Phil Wiggins and John Cephas at the 1986 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC. *Photo courtesy of Barry Lee Pearson.*

philosophical commitment to bringing blues into the 21st century. As he puts it, “A lot of people talk about it [blues] like it’s in the past, but we still get together and play at parties, and people still dance to the stuff we play.”

The duo has had an extensive recording career dating back to 1981, recording for over a half-dozen labels. At the same time, in the early 1980s, they also began a touring

schedule that they have continued up to the present day. As Cephas recalls:

In 1981 and 1982 we went to Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival tour; all over Africa and South America for the Arts America Program; and we've been to the Soviet Union and China, Mongolia and Australia. So I guess you could say we've been all over the world playing. I'll still go anywhere to play the blues and to teach people about Piedmont blues.

Together they have received numerous awards, including the Blues Foundation's Best Traditional Artist, Best Traditional Album, and the W.C. Handy Blues Entertainer of the Year. Cephas and Wiggins have also been active in other media. Phil acted in John Sayles' movie, *Matewan*, and both were in stage productions including *Chewing the Blues* and Zora Neale Hurston's play, *Polk County*, at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. Radio and video appearances include: *All Things Considered*, *A Prairie Home Companion*, *Mountain Stage*, *American Folk Blues Festival*, *Downhome Blues Festival*, and *The Blues—In Performance at the White House*.

While their performances are the very best advertising for the Piedmont tradition, Cephas and Wiggins are also outspoken advocates. As John says:

Most people know about rock and roll and Chicago blues, but not too many have heard Piedmont players unless it was Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee; so I guess it's up to us to expose them to our type of music. That's why I like to play festivals, because the crowds are larger and you can play for more people. And then sometimes at festivals, or when we tour, we'll have workshops, and students can ask us to show them things, and I enjoy teach-

ing. You know, I teach every year out in Seattle and in Elkins, West Virginia, and we also do that along with a lot of our university gigs. That's one thing I love to do, to teach young people and maybe inspire them to learn about the blues.

They are particularly honored to be part of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and Smithsonian Folkways *African American Legacy Recordings* series. They, too, share a commitment to preserving and celebrating their cultural heritage and have been recognized as advocates for the traditional arts. Cephas was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1989, and serves on the board of the National Council for the Traditional Arts. Wiggins until very recently was the Artistic Director of Blues Programs for Centrum's Port Townsend Country Blues Festival, and has worked with various Blues in the Schools programs.

Over the years they have witnessed changes in their audience and their students. As Cephas notes, "It's funny how things come around. When I was younger, it was mostly blacks who were playing the blues; then when I first started teaching, it seemed it was more young white kids interested in learning the blues. But today that's changing. I know quite a few younger blacks playing country blues, like Larry Wise, James Jackson, Rick Franklin, Jim Greene, and Mike Roach." Today these students are making their own CDs, living testimony to Cephas and Wiggins' efforts.

**Cephas and
Wiggins at the
2007 National
Folk Festival in
Richmond, VA.**





PIEDMONT BLUES

The term “Piedmont” refers to the foothills of the Appalachians running from Richmond to Atlanta. Musically it describes a fairly cohesive regional sound, a combination of repertoire and instrumental technique shared among black musicians of the Southeast ranging from Maryland to Georgia.

Cephas and Wiggins’ music draws on various roots: ballads, ragtime, pop, country, old time string band, rhythm and blues, and gospel. But its core, and the focus of this CD, is what Cephas called “Piedmont blues.” With the exception of two songs, “Going to the River” and “Dog Days of August,” this CD is Cephas and Wiggins’ effort to document the Virginia Piedmont tradition and provide a musical roadmap for other aspiring musicians. Cephas describes the style from his guitar perspective:

Phil and I play in the Piedmont style, which is pretty much the style I learned when I was growing up. We stick with the acoustic sound which is typical of the Piedmont blues players. My style is a little different from most modern blues players because I play with my thumb and fingers...it's an alternating thumb bass, and then you play the leading parts with your fingers. I use a thumb pick and one, maybe two, finger picks. My cousin, David Talliaferro, showed me how to do that. That's the way the older guys from Virginia and North Carolina played, so that's the way I learned from watching them and playing with them. That's the style that's characteristic of this area, and most of the musicians from around here could play in that style. Guys like Willie Trice, Frank Hovington, Pernell Charity, the Foddrell Brothers, John Jackson, Archie Edwards, my cousin David, they all played in

that similar style; [also] Blind Boy Fuller and Reverend Gary Davis. But those three, my cousin David, Blind Boy Fuller, and Reverend Gary Davis, they had the most influence on me as far as where my style of playing comes from.

Cephas' list of Piedmont stylists includes five Virginians, four of whom made sound recordings. Two of these, Archie Edwards and John Jackson, made a substantial number of recordings and were well known in the Virginia and Washington, D.C., region. The other artist, Cephas' cousin David, did not record despite his talent; nor did Cephas' grandfather, or for that matter the vast majority of Virginia blues artists. Nevertheless, oral testimony supports the existence of a thriving house party tradition across the state. Cornshuckings, woodcuttings, "work feasts," and breakdowns all featured dancing to music supplied by local string band performers and blues musicians. Most of these musicians, however, remain anonymous.

During the 1920s and 1930s, only three Virginia residents produced a significant body of recordings. William Moore, a barber from Tappahannock, recorded for Paramount in 1928. Half of his eight issued songs were ragtime or country dance instrumentals reflective of the pre-blues string band tradition. Lynchburg's Luke Jordan also recorded a number of sides for Victor in 1928 and 1929. Carl Martin, another native Virginian, moved out of the state as a youngster, but his 1930 recordings show his Piedmont roots. Stephen Tarter and Harry Gay made a single recording for Victor in 1928, and harmonica player Blues Birdhead cut several sides for Okeh in 1929.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Alec Seward of Newport News made some records in New York City; Silas Pendleton from Rappahannock, Virginia, was field-recorded by folklorist Horace Beck in Newport, Rhode Island; and John Tinsley of Franklin County made a single recording. Spurred by the Folk Revival of the 1960s, other artists with

Virginia ties were located, including Bill Williams, who was discovered living in Kentucky. A brilliant guitarist who claimed he toured with Blind Blake, Williams was born near Richmond not far from Cephas' home in Bowling Green. Pete Lowry recorded Pernel Charity of Sussex County, and Kip Lornell recorded a number of musicians for the Blue Ridge Institute, most notably the Foddrell family. Franklin County's Archie Edwards moved to Seat Pleasant, Maryland, and recorded several fine CDs in 1991 and 2001; and, finally, Rappahannock County's John Jackson recorded prolifically from the 1960s to his death in 2002.

Cephas and Wiggins' duet style also has deep roots in the region. The guitar and harmonica have been partners in blues since the turn of the century. Gradually there was an instrumental shift at black dances from banjo, violin, and old time breakdown music to guitar, harmonica, and blues. The changes were due, in part, to economics and availability. For example, in the early 1900s the Hohner Marine Band harmonica cost fifty cents, a guitar four or five dollars. Smaller and cheaper than the fiddle, the harmonica could take the fiddle's part in old time dance music. It also had another quality black musicians discovered: As Wiggins noted, when playing a C harmonica in the key of G, for example, and keying on the draw note, the harmonica produced a scale and sound evocative of the human voice. This approach, sometimes called the "cross harp," proved a perfect voice for the blues.

Within the Piedmont region the best-known practitioners of the acoustic harmonica/guitar duet were the late Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, both of whom had been associated with Blind Boy Fuller. They dominated southeastern blues through the Folk Revival up to the 1980s. But surprisingly, Cephas and Wiggins share little in common with them beyond the influence of Fuller. The conscious decision on Cephas' part to distance himself from Terry and McGhee allowed Cephas and Wiggins to maintain their own iden-

tity and distinct sound, and while comparisons may be inevitable, they are superficial.

Despite their music's deep roots, Cephas and Wiggins' sound is distinctly modern. Their long-time producer, Joe Wilson, himself a National Heritage Fellow, termed it "urban acoustic blues," implying its modernity. While the duo celebrate the contributions of other musicians in their work, their take on the Piedmont guitar/harmonica tradition works for today's listener. As Phil Wiggins puts it:

It's real powerful music because of where it came from and what its use was. It came from the black community and was born during hard times, and so it was really needed. And it's still here. I don't think it will die out because it's real strong. I just think that people need to hear it.



TRACK NOTES

1. Richmond Blues

This piece derives from North Carolina guitarist Julius Daniels' 1927 Victor recording. It was later redone by Bull City Red in a 1935 ARC recording of the same title. Red, born George Washington, usually worked with Blind Boy Fuller but took the lead on that session, and though he usually played washboard, he played guitar on the piece. The song is an amalgam of traditional verses, and it was common to title such pieces with the name of a nearby city as a means of localizing and personalizing them. As Cephas put it, "I'm from around the Richmond area, and I think that just about every musician from the neighborhood has a 'Richmond Blues,' and I have my version." His version shares

verses with various Fuller songs that follow the same eight-bar blues format favored in the Virginia region. He first learned the song as a youngster from his Virginia cousin, David Talliaferro, and first recorded it in 1976 when he was still working with Big Chief Ellis. It is in the key of A.

2. Going to the River

"Going to the River" is a rhythm and blues song originally recorded by Fats Domino for Imperial in 1952. Cephas learned his version from a Chuck Willis recording. Atlanta-born rhythm and blues artist Willis recorded it for Okeh in February 1953; it was reissued on a Columbia LP that was the source of this version. Cephas

admired Willis and performed several of his songs, including “You’re Still My Baby,” which Cephas and Wiggins recorded as “Bye Bye Baby.” As a young man, during his house party years, Cephas played other rhythm and blues material from artists like Willis and Jimmy Reed when their songs would have been current hits. Unlike the majority of the songs on the CD, it has New Orleans rather than Piedmont roots, and is more of a stylistic blending played in the key of D.

3. Keep Your Hands Off My Baby

Cephas refers to this piece as a house party favorite, crediting his version to Big Bill Broonzy, a popular Chicago-based blues guitarist who recorded a “Keep Your Hands Off Her” for Bluebird in 1935. Although Broonzy was part of the Delta-to-Chicago continuum, his songs sold in the Southeast due, in part, to his guitar-playing skills. The song is one of the oldest in Cephas’ repertoire, dating back to his house party days, and dovetails with

this ragtime dance blues tradition common to the house party circuit. Fellow Virginian, Franklin County’s John Tinsley, recorded “Keep Your Hands Off Her, She Don’t Bear Touching” for Mutual, a local Virginia label, in 1952. Played in A.

4. Black Rat Swing

This good-time dance blues is based on a 1941 Okeh recording by Little Son Joe, “significant other” to blues legend Memphis Minnie. On stage, Cephas credits the piece to Memphis Minnie. He first learned it from his Virginia cousin, David Talliaferro. Even today, he uses the song to illustrate the type of music played at country house parties. He first recorded the piece in 1977 for the Blue Ridge Institute with another cousin, John Woolfork. A humorous couplet and chorus, twelve-bar blues, it is in the key of E.

5. Mamie

Cephas learned his version from Blind Boy Fuller's recording, also titled "Mamie," recorded for ARC in February 1937. Evidence suggests that the song was in tradition in the 1920s, but Fuller had a gift for picking up and refurbishing traditional tunes in the mold of A.P. Carter and Ralph Peer. A soulful statement of love and loss, it illustrates the deeper side of the Piedmont tradition. Cephas' version is in the key of A.

6. Crow Jane

A Piedmont standard, it was first recorded by North Carolina guitarist Julius Daniels for Victor in 1927, the flip side being a version of "Richmond Blues." Cephas, however, learned the song from Carl Martin; "[t]hat was one I picked up from him, and that was years ago on a festival with Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong." Carl Martin was born in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, and was one of the few Virginia-born artists to record a significant body

of work. He first recorded "Crow Jane" for Bluebird in 1934. "Crow Jane" is an idiomatic, generally unflattering term for a black woman and shows up in several blues songs, including Ida Cox's "Crow Jane Woman" (1928) and Foster and Harris' "Crow Jane Alley" (1928). Another eight-bar, it alternates between threats and praise typical of the woofing that is endemic to the ongoing conflict between men and women at the core of most blues lyrics. Well known to the region, it may have already been in tradition before it was first recorded. Cephas plays it in the key of F#.

7. Dog Days of August

Phil Wiggins wrote this blues based on a folk proverb that continues, "The devil is beating his wife." One of many compositions Wiggins has contributed to the duo's repertoire, it is the other piece on this CD that is not strictly within the Piedmont tradition. Instead, it has more of a Delta or Chicago feel to it, and its twelve-bar format allows for more call-and-response,

giving Wiggins more room to show the diversity of his harmonica technique. It also provided a title for their 1984 Flying Fish CD. It is in the key of E.

8. John Henry

Probably America's best-known African American ballad, "John Henry" tells the story of a black railroad worker who engages a new steam drill machine in a contest to see which can tunnel furthest into a mountain. John Henry wins, possibly saving the jobs of his fellow workers but, as in most ballads, dies in the process. At least that's how the legend goes. The song exists in a remarkable array of forms—as a work song with protest lyrics, as a tribute extolling the virtues of an occupational hero, even as a dance song. Unlike most black ballads, "John Henry" is romanticized in a way more similar to the white ballad tradition, and, with few exceptions, the song lacks the blues irony typical of urban African American ballads. It may be based on a historical event, as are most black ballads,

and has been connected to two competing localities. Most East Coast versions tie it to Talcott, West Virginia, site of the Big Bend Tunnel and the C & O Railroad. People celebrate "John Henry Day" there, and have erected a statue of the legendary black worker on top of the mountain through which the Big Bend Tunnel runs. More recent research, however, locates the song's source at Leeds, Alabama, circa 1885. Cephas opts for the West Virginia location, and learned the piece as a knife or slide song: "I learned 'John Henry' in the open tuning. My grandfather used to sing 'John Henry' and play the guitar. Some of the other people in the black community could also play 'John Henry'; it was kind of like a traditional old standard. Anybody play the guitar, that was one of the first songs that they'd want to know. I first learned it in open tuning, what we call Sebastopol." He later recorded the song in the key of A in standard tuning in 1977, and later still in 1984 changed to the open D tuning he uses on this CD.

9. Pigmeat Crave

This ragtime dance tune is based on Blind Boy Fuller's 1939 Vocalion issue, "I Crave My Pigmeat." As noted earlier, Fuller was adept at recycling earlier hits or traditional songs, and songs concerning "pigmeat" had been in circulation for a dozen years prior to his effort. Whistler & His Jug Band cut "Pigmeat Blues" for Okeh in 1927. On July 8, 1929, "Georgia Tom" Dorsey, who later would be remembered as the father of gospel music, did his "Pigmeat Blues" for Richmond, Indiana's Gennett label. Ten days later he recorded "Pig Meat Pappa" for Brunswick. Meanwhile, Mae Glover, following Dorsey to the Gennett studio, recorded "Pig Meat Mama" on July 29, 1929. Following this minor pigmeat craze, Bo Chatmon recorded "Pig Meat Is What I Crave" in 1931, but it went unissued. However, other artists, such as Memphis Minnie (1941), Georgia White (1936), and Lead Belly (1943), later recorded their versions of "Pigmeat." "Pigmeat" is an ambivalent term for a sexually available woman who is either young and inexpe-

rienced but willing, or old and promiscuous. Cephas first recorded his version for Merrimac in 1988. It is in the key of G.

10. Prison Bound Blues

Blind Boy Fuller recorded this autobiographical complaint as "Big House Bound" for Vocalion in October 1938. In 1937, he shot his wife Cora, wounding her in the leg. He was jailed but was later released when she refused to press charges. As unusual as it may seem, this was not the only time Fuller was involved in gunplay, nor was he the only blind artist reputed to carry and use a gun. According to music community legend, his incarceration prevented him from coming to John Hammond's New York City "From Spirituals to Swing" concert. Cephas and Wiggins have also referred to the song as "County Jail Blues," and it remains one of the more soulful selections they perform. It is in the key of A.

11. Key to the Highway

Piedmont blues players know this blues by various names: “Blood Red River,” “Red River Blues,” and “Bye Bye Baby.” Songs employing the eight-bar format, including “Crow Jane” or “Richmond Blues,” are typical of the region, and “Key to the Highway” was quickly absorbed into the local matrix. The song was a national hit in the early 1940s with a version by pianist Charles Segar for Vocalion in February 1940; another by Jazz Gillum in May 1940 on Bluebird; a third by Big Bill Broonzy in 1941 on Okeh; and a final unissued take by Brownie McGhee, as Blind Boy Fuller #2, titled “Key to the Highway 70,” for Columbia. Fuller’s own take, titled “Bye Bye Baby” and accompanied by Sonny Terry, was cut for Okeh in June 1940. The song has such an anthemic quality in the Southeast that the most extensive blues survey of the region by Bruce Bastin is titled *Red River Blues*. Played in E.

12. Going Down the Road Feeling Bad

Equally popular among black and white guitarists, it is known by such titles as “I Ain’t Gonna Be Treated This Way” and “Lonesome Road Blues,” the title under which it was first recorded by Virginian Henry Whitter for Okeh in 1923. This type of blues, where the first line is repeated three times in an eight-bar format, may be an older blues form. “Careless Love,” originally a ballad, shares a similar three-repetition format, and it is possible the form represents one of the many ballad-to-blues hybrids common to the Southeast. Cephas recalls the piece as one of the earliest in his repertoire. In fact, it is the song he used to practice the finger-picking style he learned from his cousin, David Talliaferro. Even today it is the vehicle he uses to demonstrate “the Piedmont style” in workshops. He first recorded it in 1976 and plays it in the key of C.

13. Careless Love

This traditional piece is an example of a ballad that evolved into a blues, or at least a lyric song that feels like blues. Blues pioneer and early spokesperson W.C. Handy claimed he reworked a traditional murder ballad into a piece he titled “Loveless Love,” coining the term “blues ballad” to describe his hybrid. Blues artists including Bessie Smith, Lead Belly, and Blind Boy Fuller recorded versions of this popular hit, as did country artists in an ongoing testimony to its origins in both black and white tradition. Its racial ambiguity is representative of the region’s blending of African American and white aesthetics and shared repertoire. Cephas learned the song from his grandfather, noting, “I used to hear it when I went around with my grandfather. It was real popular in the black community.” A sixteen-bar blues, Cephas plays his soulful take in the key of E.

14. Great Change

Outside of his family, Cephas cites Reverend Gary Davis along with Blind Boy Fuller as having had the most influence on his musical development. Davis, who often worked with Fuller, was one of the Piedmont’s greatest guitar players, and eventually moved to New York after Fuller died. In July 1935, Fuller and Davis were driven to New York to record for ARC by talent scout J.B. Long, a Durham Dollar Store manager. Under the name Blind Gary Davis he recorded some fifteen sides, including “The Great Change in Me,” the source for Cephas’ song. Cephas, who was active in gospel as a child and was a professional gospel singer as a young man, still enjoys gospel, and he and Wiggins do a half-dozen Davis songs. Davis died in 1971, four years before Cephas and Wiggins teamed up. It is played in D.

15. Reno Factor

John Cephas learned “Reno Factory” from fellow Virginian Marvin Foddrell, who in turn learned it from his father, Posey Foddrell. The extended Foddrell family of musicians, which also includes Turner and Lynn, hail from Stuart, Virginia. Marvin Foddrell considered the piece an old, country song of the type shared between black and white string band musicians. A somewhat enigmatic piece, it echoes Peg Leg Howell’s “Rolling Mill Blues” as well as various songs in white tradition. Cephas recalls it as “...one of the old songs that originated down on the Virginia/Tennessee border at one of those logging camps.” Played in A.

16. Step It Up and Go

The immediate predecessor to this Piedmont classic was Blind Boy Fuller’s March 1940 Vocalion hit. However, as with so many traditional songs, Fuller’s piece has little claim to originality. Fuller’s manager, J.B. Long, claimed he wrote it, “inspired” by a Memphis street musician who sang a song about “Touch It Up and Go.” The Memphis Jug Band had recorded a “Bottle It Up and Go” for Okeh in 1934, and Delta stalwart Tommy McClennan had a medium hit with his own “Bottle It Up and Go” for Bluebird in 1939. Okeh-Vocalion recorded another “Step It Up and Go” by Black Cats and the kitten in October 1940. Brownie McGhee tried it in August 1940, unissued, and again (under the name Blind Boy Fuller #2) in May 1941, following Fuller’s death as “Step It Up and Go #2.” Finally, Fuller’s former partner, Sonny Terry, cut it as “Touch It Up and Go” in October 1941, but it was never released. It is in the key of G.

NOTES

For more information see:

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All quotes from interviews with the author.

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