





Senatobia is in "the Hills," a different world from the Delta. Thin, clayey soil. Everything turned grey and scorched by midsummer. Empty houses in erosion-gutted, weed-grown fields. Few cars on the road. You're liable to be the only customer in a grocery store, where the sweet-sour of pickles-jawbreakers-flypaper is a half-century heritage. Softer, slower speech than in the Delta. A milder eye. Real backwoods astonishment over strangers. Antebellum atmosphere. Here, where the bones and gristle of the land showed in the erosion washes, lived Sid Hemphill, the "boar-hog musician of the hills."

Off the gravel a couple of miles through sparse scrub oaks and starved broomweed pastures, we found Sid Hemphill's shack at what appeared to be the fountainhead of all erosion. It teetered on a small lip of land which the running sores of the rain gullies had almost eaten away and from which they had sprangled out, ten and twenty feet deep, to carve, gut, and destroy the surrounding field. One slender bridge of land linked Sid's dwelling and the pasture gate. Across this final crumbling bridge I gingerly drove. There were no dogs or chickens in the yard. The sagging, unpainted door in the weathered-grey, warping house was closed. My heart sank. Here, in this graveyard of a place, I would miss my man. He was dead, ill, away. I walked across the crazy porch and was about to knock when the door flew open. Sid Hemphill, whom the blind harp blower [Turner Junior Johnson in Clarksdale, Miss.] called "the best musician in the world," stood in the doorway.

No one had told me that Sid Hemphill was blind, but it was the last thing you'd recall about him. His face blazed with inner light. He ran rather than walked everywhere. He could never wait for his wife to bring something, but always darted up to find it himself. His speech, which could not keep pace with his thoughts and designs, had become telegraphic and brusque. —Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 1993

Lomax: Who'd you learn to play the fiddle from?

Hemphill: My daddy.

AL: Was he a good fiddler?

SH: Yes, he was a good 'un.

AL: Was he born under slavery?

SH: Sho was.

AL: How old was he when he learned to play the fiddle?

SH: I don't know sir, I reckon he was about near 50, I expect. Well, about 45, I reckon.

AL: Did he tell you about any of these tunes, where he picked them up?

SH: Sure did. He told me he got 'em all in the South [of Mississippi]. He said he learned 'em from his colored cousin — colored fiddle player. First cousin.

AL: Was he a Mississippi man?

SH: Yes, he was Mississippi. Down Choctaw County.

AL: Where were you born?

SH: I was borned up here.

AL: You're how old?

SH: I'm sixty-five. Be sixty-six in next month if I live.

AL: Tell me how many different instruments you play.

SH: Well, I can play... I don't know, sir, hardly, lemme see: play guitar, fiddle, mandolin, snare drum, feist [fife], bass drum, quills, banjo, pretty good organ player.

AL: How many songs do you know?

SH: Oh, I don't know, sir — I know a lot of 'em. Take me a good while to count 'em up. You can put it somewhere like a hundred. I know more than a hundred, though. Play any kind of church song a man want to hear.

AL: You play church songs and reels?

SH: And reels.



Multi-instrumentalist, band-leader, and composer Sid Hemphill (1876–1961) was for decades the musical patriarch of the Mississippi Hill Country. He and his band — comprised of Alec "Turpentine" Askew, Will Head, and Lucius Smith; like Sid, all from Panola County, Miss. — were fixtures at dances and frolics throughout the Hill Country and the Delta, and up to Memphis. Alan first recorded Blind Sid in August 1942, near Sledge, Mississippi, where the Hemphill band was appearing at a country picnic. By that date hundreds of commercial records had been made of the music of the Delta, and the preponderance of those were of or relating to the blues form, with guitar or piano accompaniment. Lomax's recordings were the first made of the Hill Country's local dance music, and contributed to a broader perspective of black vernacular instrumentation with their inclusion of the fiddle and banjo of the string band*, the fife and drum ensemble, and the cane panpipes or "quills." Only two artists in the pre-war "race" recording era had cut sides featuring quills — "Ragtime Texas" Henry Thomas and a "Big Boy Cleveland," who is purported to have hailed from Mississippi — and Sid described their music to Lomax as "old folks' music. Music of olden time. Back yonder everybody used to play on quills. Now, ain't hardly common no more." The band featured two sets, one with ten holes, the other with four, blown by both Hemphill and Askew. One of the sources for Sid's quill-led dance tunes was a fellow he'd heard play as a child in Como, named Jeems Lomax.

Sid Hemphill made many of his band's instruments and wrote a number of their songs. The longest of these, concerning a local bad man named Jack Castle, was 26 verses†; another, about a train wreck on the Sardis and Delta railroad, owned and operated by the Carrier Lumber & Manufacturing Co., ran to 21. Although the band's session with Lomax focused on these so-called "blues ballads," traditional lyrics like "Jesse James" and "John Henry," and the breakdowns and square-dance tunes generically called "reels" ("The Eighth of January"; "Leather Britches"), their rendition of the popular chestnut "The Sidewalks of New York" suggests their repertoire's diversity. And this, in turn, reflects the diversity of the audiences for whom they performed: rich and poor, black and white. Hemphill boasted that his "Carrier song" was especially popular among the principals in the story. In fact, Mr. Woolard, the section foreman, had asked Sid to compose the song; Hemphill recalled singing it for him, along with Dave Cowart and Mr. Bailey, both of whom appear in the ballad, around 1903. "One of 'em was a rough engineer," he explained to Lomax. "The other was a good 'un."

The Sledge picnic was the site of the first-ever recordings made of an African American fife-and-drum band; an ensemble that has been argued to constitute the oldest extant form of African music in the country. "Finding this music still alive," Lomax wrote in *The Land Where the Blues Began*, "was the greatest surprise of all my collecting trips in America." Alan visited the Hill Country again in 1959, remarking in *Land* that he was worried that he'd find upon returning, as he had in other locales, "that the best people had passed away or withered and their communities had gone to pieces." Instead he found the fife-and-drum scene thriving in the band led by the brothers Ed and Lonnie Young, whom he recorded to stereo tape and who would soon after appear at the Newport Folk Festival as the Southern Fife & Drum Corps. Lomax also found that Sid Hemphill was "still alive and fiddling," but the octogenarian had apparently hung up his "feist," as Lomax only recorded him, with his old friend Lucius Smith, performing their rickety old reels on banjo and fiddle, along with a couple of quill-and-drum pieces.

Hemphill and Smith's collaboration lasted for 54 years, and Sid's death in 1963 left Lucius with no one to play with. Alan's last trip to the Hill Country was in 1978, capturing the picnic dances led by fife-blowers Otha Turner and Napolian Strickland on video. When Lomax visited Smith again on that trip, he was ninety years old but could still frail the banjo. "Sid was a good man. He learnt all us," Lucius wistfully recalled. "But all them dead but Lucius. Left me by myself." He died in 1980.

*This isn't to suggest that Mississippi's black string bands were unrepresented in pre-war commercial recordings. One of the most popular groups of the era were the Mississippi Sheiks, who worked out of Jackson and featured the fiddling of Lonnie and Bo Chatman. The various Jackson-based bands led by the Chatmans' friend and frequent partner, the banjo-mandolinist Charlie McCoy, were also particularly exciting examples. (See the Jackson Blue Boys, Mississippi Blacksnakes, and Mississippi Mudsteppers, among them.)

†The Jack Castle ballad, called "The Roguish Man," and another about a local lynching ("The Strayhorn Mob"), were too long to be recorded to disc without interruption and could not be satisfactorily pieced together for inclusion here.

Sid Hemphill
Oct 22, 1942

I receive your letter
and was glade to no that you ingay
your Record. and those quills I will
have them ready in a few days you
can be looing for them I recive my
money and what please and all the other
and the same

all from Sidney Hemphill

Sid Hemphill: vocal, fiddle, quills (A3), snare drum, and fife
Alec Askew: guitar, vocal (B2) and quills (B2)
Lucius Smith: banjo, possibly bass drum
Will Head: bass and/or snare drum

These instrumentation credits are based largely on those given by Lomax in *The Land Where the Blues Began* and should be taken with a grain of salt, as other recollections in the book don't jibe with what's heard on the original discs.

Recorded by Alan Lomax in Sledge, Mississippi, August 15, 1942.
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