

THE ALAN LOMAX COLLECTION

PORTRAIT: Fred McDowell, the First Recordings

These are the first recordings of the great Mississippi Fred McDowell, recorded in stereo in September, 1959 by Alan Lomax. Joyful, sad, erotic and unbeatable blues with a pulse you can hear the pulse a mile in the Mississippi dark. Many songs are released here for the first, including several that he never recorded again.

THE PORTRAIT SERIES

Throughout his career, Alan Lomax worked extensively with the greatest artists in folk music, many of whom he was the first to record. The Portrait series focuses in depth on those brilliant artists and heroes of traditional music.

THE ALAN LOMAX COLLECTION

The Alan Lomax Collection gathers together the American, European, and Caribbean field recordings, world music compilations and ballad operas of writer, folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax.

Remastered to 20 bit digital from the original field recordings. Contains previously unreleased recordings.

1. Going Down the River
2. 61 Highway
3. Wished I Was in Heaven Sitting Down*
4. When the Train Comes Along* (Sidney Carter and Rose Hemphill, vocals)
5. Shake 'Em On Down*
6. Worried Mind*
7. Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On Jesus*
8. You Done Told Everybody
9. Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning* (with Annie Mae McDowell, vocal)
10. What's the Matter Now?*
11. Good Morning Little Schoolgirl*
12. I Want Jesus to Walk With Me* (with James Shorty, vocal)
13. Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning* (instrumental)
14. You're Gonna Be Sorry

*Previously unreleased.

MISSISSIPPI FRED MCDOWELL

"Mississippi" Fred McDowell was born in the country east of Memphis, near Rossville, Tennessee, on January 12, probably in 1904. Fred lost his parents as a child, and he moved to Mississippi where a sister took care of him. As a young man, he returned to Memphis, working in a feed mill until about 1929, when he returned to Mississippi to pick cotton. Eventually, he settled on a small farm near Como, where Alan Lomax found him in 1959.

Fred had heard the recordings of Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Willie Johnson. He actually heard Patton in person at a Cleveland, Mississippi jukejoint around 1929. All three made an impression on him, but none more so than Johnson, whose brilliant slide work he studied closely. Local fiddler and fife and drum band leader Sid Hemphill was another important influence, as was guitarist Eli Green.

He picked up extra money playing for friends and neighbors as well in juke joints and dances in and around Como. He never sought a full time career in music, nor did he join the great black migration into urban centers like Chicago, preferring to work his own farm in Como. He did not even have his own guitar until 1940, yet he went on to enjoy the greatest fame and commercial success of any of the performers that Alan Lomax recorded on his 1959 southern field trip. Lomax wrote of him at the time that "In true country fashion he kept telling me that he couldn't play nearly so well as other men he knew. In my estimation, he is simply a modest man, for in him the great tradition of the blues runs pure and deep and no note in one of his performances lacks a touch of great and gentle melancholy."

Like many of the musicians Lomax recorded over the years, Fred McDowell had never heard a recording of himself. As Lomax recalled in his 1993 book "The Land Where the Blues Began," the experience had an immediate effect:

"The sound we captured made us all deliriously happy. The blues, speaking through Fred, sounded like a deep-voiced herald of the *loi*, with a silver-voiced heavenly choir answering him from the treble strings. When we played his recording back to him, he stomped up and down on the porch, whooping and laughing and hugging his wife. He knew he had been heard and felt his fortune had been made."

As Shirley Collins relates below, Lomax's introduction to Fred McDowell came through his neighbor Ed Young, the cane fife player. The Young Brothers Fife and Drum Band represented an early stage of African American music, with deep roots in pre-blues styles. For Lomax though, Fred McDowell represented the blues itself in its most vital and compelling stage: the free-metered adaptation of black work songs and field hollers. "Some of Fred's blues had the four line form, like 'Careless Love' and 'See See Rider'," Lomax wrote, "with the first line

repeated three times over and before the rhyming line, others simply consisted of one line repeated over and over, until Fred wanted to have guitar or comb break and introduce a new idea" Even when Fred adapted modern blues pieces like "61 Highway" or "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl", the effect was to make those pieces more rural, not to make Fred more urban.

By the time of these recordings, Fred McDowell had developed a complex, highly personal style that Lomax sought to capture in detail. Most of these recordings were made on the last of four nights that they worked together. Fred recorded numerous albums in the thirteen years following these first sessions, but rarely with such rich and sensitive aural results, all the more amazing when realizes that Lomax was recording him at 7 1/2 inches per second, rather than the current standard of 15ips or the current studio standard of 30ips.

The many sonic facets of Fred's style are immediately apparent. He used a hand fashioned bottleneck on his right hand with which he could produce a variety of subtle and sensitive effects. His tone is exceptionally mellow and dramatic and never resorts to the more violent slashing of less accomplished slide players, particularly electric guitarists. In addition, he frequently introduces high harmonics and percussive rattles with his slide, creating complex but always flowing accompaniment for his voice, which frequently yields to his guitar for further dramatic effect. These kinds of modifications to voice and instrument are well known in West Africa, and represent some of the most African aesthetics that one can find in the blues.

Fred frequently accelerates his tempi, keeping all of his subtle ornaments intact in the process. Miles Pratcher, who accompanies him on three tracks, has no trouble following this. His performances with his brother that are included on Southern Journey Vol. 3, 61 Highway Mississippi (Rounder 1703) demonstrate even more extreme accelerations. On the same track, his sister Fanny Davis contributes more modification to voice and guitar with her comb-and-tissue paper work.

The success of Fred's recordings for Lomax led to albums on Testament, Arhoolie and Capitol, among others. His next recordings did not come until 1962, when Dick Spottswood recorded him once again at his home in Como (these recordings are now available on Mississippi Fred McDowell, Rounder 2138) He appeared at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964 and made the first of several European appearances at the American Folk Blues Festival in 1965. A track he recorded entitled "You Got To Move" was covered by the Rolling Stones on their "Sticky Fingers" albums. Royalties from this recording gave Fred and his wife a nice payday late in his life. He died in Memphis on July 3, 1972.

In later years, Lomax wondered aloud if the somber photographs he took of Fred in 1959 captured all of him. When one was used for the cover of "Land Where

the Blues Began," he said "It makes him look so sad and solitary when in fact his music made him the most popular guy in town!"

English folksinger Shirley Collins was Alan Lomax's assistant on his 1959 field trip. Recently, she had this to say about their meeting with Fred McDowell:

I shall never forget my first sight of Fred McDowell as he walked out of the trees and into the clearing of tiny wooden shacks in Como, Mississippi, where mangy dogs and chickens ran and scratched around. We had been recording the old musicians Lonnie and Ed Young, their primitive music played on drums and "fistes" (cane fifes), and watching the extraordinary dance "The Buzzard Lope" which, accompanied by the women's handclapping, clearly showed its African origins. I found this old clapping, clearly showed its African origins. I found this old music so fascinating and compelling that for a little while I felt resentful when Fred walked in with his guitar, thinking that he would prove too modern. It took just a few minutes to realize that this dignified, modest and calm man was a major discovery, with a wonderful repertoire. He was a sharecropper, picking cotton all day long from early dawn, and could only record in the evenings, so we worked over four nights. We recorded outdoors, and on the second evening there was a majestic thunderstorm that was unlike anything I had ever experienced in England. It seemed to me there were six storms raging at once, sheet lightning illuminating the countryside around as far as you could see, forked lightning that flashed along the amazing cloud formation, and strikes down into the earth that shook it. The electricity cut out three times, the rain came down like Niagara Falls, and so that night we just all sat and talked.

We got to know Fred and his wife quite well, and I grew so fond of them that when we left Como, I kissed his wife good-bye. A silence fell, and Alan later told me that it was the first time the people there had seen a white woman kiss a black woman. I believe that the meeting with Fred was one of the most important events of my life, and that he was one of the greatest blues discoveries.--Shirley Collins, East Sussex, England; March 1997.

SONG NOTES

I'M GOING DOWN THE RIVER

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal; Fanny Davis, comb; Miles Pratcher, guitar.
Recorded September 22, 1959 in Como, Mississippi

Fred recorded three versions of this piece for Lomax, two of which we present here. This piece was called "Going Down to the Races" on the New World album "Roots of the Blues," where it was previously released. For that release, Lomax wrote of this piece: "Here is the blues in its full dress as joyful, sad, erotic and unbeatable dance music, running all night long, all weekend long, at the little country suppers and the sukeyjumps where the folks dance right on the ground or pack into a little one-room shack and move so that the whole fragile building

reverberates to the beat and you can hear the pulse a mile or so in the Mississippi dark."

Miles Pratcher, Fred's neighbor, who had recorded with his fiddling brother Bud for Lomax earlier in the week (see Southern Journey vol. 3 "61 Highway Mississippi, Rounder 1703 and vol. 6 Sheep, Sheep Don'tcha Know the Road, Rounder 1706) lays down the foundation for this powerhouse of rhythm with a rocking dance beat. McDowell plays counter-rhythms to this beat with both hands and swings his voice to this polyrhythmic accompaniment. Fanny Davis adds still more, underscoring Fred's ringing slides with a rich tone that belies the economy and simplicity of her instrument: a comb wrapped in tissue paper.

I'm going down the river, well, I take the right hand road, (2X)
Lord, I ain't gonna stop walking till I get in that sweet mama's door

Lord the girl I'm lovin' got that great long curly hair (2X)
Lord her mama and her papa sure don't allow me there

Sure don't 'low me there...

Sun rose this mornin' baby, Lord I was layin' down on my floor (2X)
Lord, no woman to love me, baby, no place to go

Lord, nobody, love me baby...

Lord, I'm goin' away baby, don't you want to go?
I'm goin' away baby, mama, don't you want to go?
Lord, I'm goin' somewhere I ain't never been before.

etc.

61 HIGHWAY BLUES

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal. Recorded in Como, MS, September 25, 1959.

One of Fred's adaptations of a commercially recorded blues, in this case, one by Will Batts (among others), a Memphis based musician who recorded it for Vocalion in 1933. Batts was active in Memphis during the time that Fred lived there. In McDowell's hands, it takes on the free style of the old-time country bluesmen, with the bottleneck in his left hand to double the melodic part and playing a complex African-like poly-rhythm with his right. In his recording log, Lomax wrote of this performance: "Perfect."

The highway is a recurrent image in the blues. Big Joe Williams sang of Highway 49, Son Bonds sang of Highway 80, and Curtis Jones sang of Highway 51, with some of the same lyrics that Fred used. For Fred and other Mississippi

bluesmen, Highway 61 was the most relevant, running through Memphis and the Mississippi Delta before going on to New Orleans.

Lord, that 61 Highway, it's the longest road I know, (2X)
She run from New York City, run right by my baby's door.

Well, there's some folks say them Greyhound buses don't run (2X)
Lord, just go to West Memphis, baby, look down Highway 61.

I said please, please see somebody for me, (2X)
If you see my baby, tell her she's all right with me.

Lord, if I should happen to die, baby, before you think my time have come, (2X)
I want you to bury my body down on Highway 61.

WISHED I WAS IN HEAVEN SITTING DOWN:

Fred McDowell, vocal & guitar.

Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como Mississippi

. This is the first and slowest of the three versions of this song that McDowell recorded for Lomax. (the others can be heard on Southern Journey Vol. 1, Voices From the American South, Rounder 1700, and vol. 6 Sheep, Sheep Don'tcha Know the Road, Rounder 1706). Substituting guitar notes for words is a favorite technique of country bluesmen, and something in which Fred McDowell particularly excelled. Words in parentheses are played on the guitar, not sung.

Lord, I wished I was in heaven sittin' (down), (2X)
Oh angel, Oh my (Lord),
Wished I was in heaven sittin' (down).

Lord, I wished I was in heaven sittin' (down), (2X)
Oh angel, Oh my (Lord),
Wished I was in heaven (sittin' down).

Wished (I was in heaven sitting down)
(Wished I was in heaven sitting down)
Ohh, Angel (on my knees)
(Wished I was in heaven sitting down)

WHEN THE TRAIN COME ALONG

Sidney Carter and Rose Hemphill, vocals; Fred McDowell, guitar. Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como, Mississippi.

Sidney Carter and Rose Hemphill were the daughters of Sidney Hemphill, the fife player and fiddler who Lomax first recorded in 1941. (see Southern Journey Vols.

1 & 3) The Hemphill's were friends of the McDowell's and the two daughters dropped in during the recording session, and did some impromptu harmonizing, with Fred adjusting his playing to fit the sisters' vocal range.

When the train come along, Lord
When the train come along, Lord
Gonna meet her at the station,
When the train come along

If you see my mother
And she ask for me
Gonna meet her at the station
When the train come along.

When the train come along, Lord
When the train come along, Lord
Gonna meet her at the station,
When the train come along

If you see my father
And he ask for me
Gonna meet him at the station
When the train come along

SHAKE 'EM ON DOWN

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal; Fanny Davis, comb; Miles Pratcher, guitar.
Recorded September 21, 1959 in Como, Mississippi.

This is an alternate take to the version available on the Atlantic Records "Sounds of the South" box set, recorded before the released take. Fanny Davis was bit close to the microphone at first, giving listeners surely the most powerful comb work ever performed. Fred and Miles conjure up a powerful rhythm here.

"Shake 'Em On Down" came to be one of Fred's most popular pieces. He recorded several fine versions subsequently. Bukka White and Big Joe Williams both recorded strong versions, and Tommy McLennan even recorded "New Shake 'Em On Down" in the 1940's. Even before his recording career though, Fred's version was so popular around Como that neighbors often just called him "Shake 'Em."

If you come to my house
You gonna find
Me around, Lordy,
Somewhere baby
Lordy, shake 'em on down
Lordy...

If you see my baby
Lordy standin' around
You know we
Getting ready now, we gonna
Shake 'em on down
Lordy...

Put your knees together
Let your backbone move
Ain't no one in town can
Shake 'em down like you

Oh Lord you...
Oh Lord you..

Gwine way up on the hill
Gwine get some ice
'Fore we get back gonna
Shake 'em down twice

WORRIED MIND

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal.

Recorded September 25, 1959, in Como, Mississippi.

Another of Fred's commercial blues adaptations. In this case the original source was Big Maceo Merriwether, who recorded "Worried Life Blues" for RCA Bluebird in 1941. This piece also became closely associated with him and was sometimes listed as "Fred's Worried Life Blues," and also as "Someday Baby." Fred remakes the song over substantially, with only the chorus being immediately recognizable. In addition, the lyric "You ain't gonna worry my life anymore" has become "You ain't gonna worry my mind anymore."

You made me weep
And you made me mourn
You caused me to leave my
My happy home
But someday baby,
You ain't gonna worry my mind anymore

You told everybody in the neighborhood
I was a dirty mistreater
Didn't mean you no good
But someday baby
You ain't gonna worry my mind anymore

When I was gamblin'
You tried to win
You took my money
To another man
But bye-bye baby

Bye-bye baby,
You ain't gonna worry
Worry my mind anymore
Mind anymore

When I was sick, down
baby on my bed
You came to see me
And you walked away
But bye-bye (baby)
You ain't gonna worry my mind anymore

If I had money
like Henry Ford
I'd buy me a women
Honey everywhere
But bye-bye baby
You ain't gonna worry my mind anymore

Bye-bye baby,
You ain't gonna worry
Worry my mind anymore
Mind anymore

WOKE UP THIS MORNING WITH MY MIND ON JESUS
Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal. Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como,
Mississippi.

A religious piece that Fred rarely (if ever) recorded after these sessions. He substitutes guitar notes for words freely from the second verse on, voicing words and phrases with his supple slide work.

Well, woke up this morning with my mind
Stayin' on Jesus (twice)
Halleluh, halleluh...

Well singing and praying with my (mind)
Staying on Jesus
Singin' and praying with my mind
staying on (Jesus)

Well singin' and prayin (with my mind)
(staying on Jesus)
Hallelu, hallelujah...

Walking and talking (and my mind)
Staying on (Jesus)
Walking and talking and my mind
Staying on Jesus
Halleluh, halleluh....

etc.

YOU DONE TOLD EVERYBODY

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal, recorded September 25, 1959, in Como, Mississippi

This was a favorite accompaniment style for Fred, which he uses for the first and last tracks on this album, as well on "Germany Blues" heard on Southern Journey Vol. 3, 61 Highway Mississippi (Rounder 1703).

Fred opens with a relatively conventional "AAB" grouping of lyrics, repeating the first line before concluding his thoughts in the third line. In the second stanza, he opts to repeat the first line twice, breaking up the line and punctuating the phrase with low slide notes, an effect he employs later in the song as well.

Lord, you done tol' everybody in your neighborhood (2X)
You was a dirty mistreater, Lord, you didn't mean me no good

I wouldn't hate it so bad, baby, but you broke my diamond ring (3X)

Lord, I'm goin' to the sergeant, I'm gonna call that chief of police, (2X)

Lord, my baby done quite me, I can't see no peace. (2X)

I looked down the road, baby, just as far as I could see, (2X)
Lord, a gang of women, they was follerin' right after me.

Yes, I know somethin' gwine on wrong, (2X)
I know my baby woke up, Lord, she found her mister gone;
Have been so many people strolln' 'way from home, Lord, Lord.

KEEP YOUR LAMPS TRIMMED AND BURNING:

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal. Annie Mae McDowell, vocal.
Recorded in Como, MS; September 25, 1959.

The recordings of guitar playing, street corner evangelist Blind Willie Johnson were the primary influence on Fred's slide guitar style. Johnson was in a class by himself as a slide guitarist and McDowell may have been the only other player to approach his mastery and subtlety. Once again, Fred freely fills in words with his guitar, while his wife echos his voice in some places, and sings the words that he plays on his guitar in others. Blind Willie Johnson occasionally recorded with female singers accompanying him in a similar fashion.

Just keep your lamps trimmed and burnin (3X)
See what the Lord has done

Don' get worried, (3X)
See what the Lord has done.

Don't get worried, (3X)
See what the Lord has done

Keep a-your lamps (trimmed and burnin') (3X)
See what the Lord have done

Don't get worried, (3X)
See what the Lord has done

etc.

WHAT'S THE MATTER NOW

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal. Unknown broom.
Recorded September 25, 1959, in Como, Mississippi.

This piece bears some resemblance to Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Black Snake Moan," although it is slower and more deliberate in tempo. Fred's guitar accompaniment, like that he uses for "Going Down to the Brazos," is one that he favored for his looser, more improvisational pieces. In spite of the menacing lyrics, his performance elicits a good humored response from those present.

Well....what's the matter now?
Lord, I wonder, baby, what's the matter now?

Where were you when the rooster crowed 'fore day?
(Woman, spoken: "You know where I was!")
It was soon one morning, everything was quiet
It was soon one morning, when everything was quiet

Lord bring me my pistol, Lord my shotgun too
Bring me my pistol, my shotgun too
If I meet my baby ain't no tellin what she might do

Well, it's bye bye baby, I ain't got no more to say
Well, it's bye bye baby, I ain't got no more to say

Rather see my woman, come in sloppy drunk
Rather see my woman come in sloppy drunk
Than to see my baby, packin' up her trunk

Well, it's bye-bye baby, Lord if you call that gone
Well, it's bye-bye, if call that gone

GOOD MORNING LITTLE SCHOOLGIRL

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal. Recorded September 25, 1959.

This is Fred's version of Sonny Boy Williamson I's signature piece, one he recorded several more times in his career.

Good morning little schoolgirl
Good morning little schoolgirl
Can I go (home with,)
Can I go home with you
Tell your mama and your papa
Lord, I'm a schoolboy too

Come on be my baby
Come on be my baby
I'll buy you a diamond
I'll buy a diamond ring
If you don't like that, aint gonna buy you a doggone thing

I don't know hardly
I don't know hardly
What in this world,
What' in this world to do
I don't mean to hurt your feelings,
Lord, getting angry too

I 'member way back
I 'member way back
When I was the age of
When I was the age of nine
Lord, I think about my schooldays,
Sure do worry my mind

I WANT JESUS TO WALK WITH ME

Fred McDowell, guitar; James Shorty, vocal. Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como, Mississippi.

An alternate to the performance issued by Atlantic Records. Once again, Fred adjust his technique to fit the vocal range of another singer, in this case his friend and neighbor James Shorty. James Shorty can also be heard singing with Fred on Southern Journey Vol. 6, "Sheep, Sheep Don'tcha Know the Road" (Rounder 1706). Fred initially emphasizes the treble strings in his slide accompaniment, before dramatically switching to the bass strings as Shorty hums the last verse.

Well, I want Jesus to walk with me
Yes, I want Jesus to walk with me
Whilst I'm on this tedious journey
Yes, I want Jesus to walk with me

Walk with my mother, Lord walk with me
Walk with my mother, Lord walk with me
Whilst I'm on this tedious journey
Yes I want Jesus to walk with me

Won't you be my doctor, come and walk with me
Just be my doctor, come and walk with me
Whilst I'm on this tedious journey
Yes, I want Jesus to walk with me

Don't you leave me alone, no, Don't leave me alone
Don't you leave me alone, no, Don't leave me alone
Whilst I'm on this tedious journey
Yes I want Jesus to walk with me

(hums lyrics)
Yes I want Jesus to come and walk with me

KEEP YOUR LAMPS TRIMMED AND BURNING

Fred McDowell, guitar. Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como, Mississippi.

This fascinating instrumental fragment is a further illustration of McDowell brilliant slide technique, particularly in the way that he could further modify his guitar's voice with high harmonics and rattling slides.

YOU'RE GONNA BE SORRY

Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal; Fanny Davis, comb; Miles Pratcher, guitar.
Recorded September 22, 1959.

Another piece using the improvisational pattern employed on "Going Down to the River," and perhaps the most free-style of all of Fred's recordings for Lomax.

Lord, you're gonna be sorry you ever done me wrong (2X)
Say you gonna be sorry you ever done me wrong
I don't beat you lady, honey and I'll be gone

I'm going by the pawnshop, put my watch in pawn (2X)

What you gonna do baby, when your trouble get like mine? (2X)
Lord you can't do me, honey like you done poor "Shine"
Lord you took his money, swear you can't take mine

Lord I wonder what's the matter now? (2X)
Lord I wonder baby, wonder what's the matter now

Lord I'm still wonderin', I don't know what to do...

Lord I wonder baby, what's gonna 'come of me? (2X)

Well, it's come on baby, take a little walk with me (2X)
Lord come on baby, Lordy, take a little walk with me