The Africac-American Migration and the Railroad Blues of William "Big Bill" W Broonzy

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Roger HOUSE
Emerson College

Abstract
This paper presents the songs of American blues singer William "Big Bill" Broonzy (1893-1958). Broonzy was a participant in the mass movement of African-Americans from the farms to the cities in the first half of the 20th century. He also was a best-selling recording artist during the 1930s, singing about the events of the time. This paper examines the songs of Broonzy for commentary on the larger history of the mass migration. The focus of this article is on the image of the railroad trains in his blues recordings. The railroads were an important vehicle for traveling from the farms to the cities.

Keywords: Migrant, Poverty, Southern Plantations, Sharecropper, Blues Music.

The migration of African-Americans from the plantations to the cities during the first half of the 20th century has been the focus of on-going research and interpretation. While early scholars examined issues such as civil rights, economic conditions, urban race riots, and ghetto formation, recent studies have explored new evidence on the dynamics of the migration itself. The migration lasted from 1915 to 1960 as an estimated 4 million Blacks left the rural South for cities across America. From 1915 to 1920, during the first wave of mass movement, the population of Harlem grew from 92,000 to 152,000, and the population of Southside Chicago rose from 44,000 to 109,000 people. This exodus would lay the foundation for others to follow over the decades.

Contemporary social scientists concluded that the migration stemmed from economic and social concerns, with the major reason being poverty. The southern plantation system evolved to keep farm workers in debt. But even in better circumstances the land could not support the growing rural populations. In addition, farm workers (known as sharecroppers or tenant farmers) had to deal with the ravages of floods, droughts, and insect destruction, and had to compete with the introduction of tractors and other labor-saving machines. The social scientist William DuBois, citing one 1917 investigator who witnessed the problem of mass hunger, wrote: "Nothing else seemed left for hundreds of colored tenants to do but to go into the cities or to the North to earn even their food. Nothing was left on the farms and the landowners could not or would not make any further advances." In 1923, social scientist Charles Johnson concluded that economic misery was the central issue driving the migration. He noted high rates of infant death as evidence of the inability of rural districts to feed growing populations. (DuBois, "Migration of Negroes," 47-48; Johnson, "How Much," *Black Protest*, 55).

Moreover, farm workers struggled against the harsh realities of racial injustice, inadequate schools, and police brutality. DuBois chronicled the observations of persons who noted injustice as a prime reason for leaving. One man wrote about meeting a group of 80 people preparing to leave rural Louisiana: "I met them, and they informed me that they were willing to go anywhere rather than continue to live like they had been. They were heading toward Chicago" (DuBois, "Migration of Negroes," 47-48).

In comparison, major cities offered new job opportunities, especially during the years of the world wars, when urban factories faced labor shortages. In addition, the cities provided access to better schools, voting rights, civil rights, and urban culture. During the 1930s, when the nation grappled with economic depression, the northern cities provided cash relief for the destitute without as much racial discrimination as in the South. In short, the cities offered migrants a better chance of fully participating in American life (Grossman, *Hope*, 35-37; Spear, *Chicago*, 129-134).

In recent years, scholars have examined this event from the perspective of participants. For example, Jim Grossman explored the deliberate manner in which migrants made the decision to leave the South. He chronicled the gradual process of gathering information through migration clubs -- which contacted institutions in the North and served as central information resources -- newspapers, traveling railroad workers, and letters from people who had made the trip. The benefits and drawbacks of relocation were discussed in church meetings, recreation halls, informal gatherings, and with family members. As a consequence, migrants turned to community leaders in the North and at home for advice (Grossman, *Hope*, 89-97).

In an attempt to include the outlook of participants, scholars have turned to new sources of information, such as popular culture. This article is part of that effort -- it seeks to incorporate the voice of an important blues singer, William "Big Bill" Broonzy, in the study of the migration. As both a migrant and a major recording artist, Big Bill is an important resource for understanding the culture and mindset of the "blues people." As one of the best-selling recording artists of great depression, his songs can provide commentary on the sentiments of the working-class at a critical juncture in the experience of Blacks. This article examines the image of the railroad in his recordings.

The Railroad Blues

Broonzy was born in 1893 on a cotton plantation in Scott, Mississippi. He grew up on plantations in Mississippi and Arkansas and prepared himself for life as a poor farm worker who earned extra money playing the fiddle at picnics and dances. All this changed during World War I. At the age of 25, he was drafted into the army and spent the next year in France working with a black labor unit. After the war, he returned to Arkansas with a new outlook, one that would not permit him to go back to his old way of life. Broonzy decided to leave Arkansas for both calculated and impulsive motives, but looking back, he summarized his overall purpose in the following statement: "The main reason I left home was because I couldn't stand eating out of the back trough all the time" (Lomax, *Land*, 436).

In leaving, he followed the pathway laid out by 500,000 sharecroppers during the war years. They left their homes by foot, mule, wagon, car, and train, the process captured in many of the contemporary blues songs. According to blues historian Paul Oliver, the topic of "leaving" is a dominant idea in the pre-World War II blues (*Blues Fell*, 45-46). While this idea was simply an exercise in fantasy for some people, or a way of coping with frustration or boredom, for others it expressed the real action of departing from family and loved ones and venturing to new locations. They walked away in the hope of getting a lift on a passing wagon, car, or truck – and the popular image of the highway illustrates this reality.

One of the dominant methods of transportation envisioned in the blues is the railroad. The image of the railroad has a long history in African-American folklore, going back to the days of slavery when the train was recognized as a means of psychic escape in the spirituals. The development of actual escape networks known as the "Underground Railroad" with its array of "conductors" and "stations" enhanced the image of the railroad even more in black folklore. During the mass migration, the railroad took on new meaning as the literal vehicle of national travel as well as an important employer of black men. As such, it is mentioned in many blues compositions. For example, one study of African-American social songs from 1930 to the 1960s chronicled the connection of the railroad to issues of both family separation and good employment – the companies hired thousands of Blacks as firemen, track layers, maids and porters. (Oliver, *Blues Fell*, 58; Richardson, "Black Workers").

Broonzy describes migrant riding trains both to see and toleave loved ones, heading to the North as well as back tothe South, waiting for trains at depots and at bends alongthe tracks, and prevailing upon railroad police conductors to let them ride for cheap. Collectively thesongs portray a people on the move, traveling the railswith a sense of adventure or despair. Consider this stanzain the 1935 recording of "She Caught the Train:"

My baby packed her trunk and she started to the train.
My baby packed her trunk and she started to the train.
I mean that's really enough trouble to drive a poor black man insane.(DOCD 5052)

In the 1934 recording "Hobo Blues," Broonzy raises the issue of "stealing a ride" on a train. The song is released at a time when thousands of desperate young men took to the rails to escape poverty. While the narrator talks about the freedom to ride trains at whim, the reality of life for a migrant "hobo" was dangerous indeed. A man could be injured in any number of ways: from the risky act of waiting for a train to slow down for the chance to jump aboard undetected, to climbing along the cars to hide in the baggage car, to the effort to snuggle between the brake rods underneath freight cars. Many a sharecropper lost his grip and fell to his death or suffered permanent injury, like Albert Murray's fictional character in *Train Whistle Guitar,* the crippled blues singer Luzana Cholly. Many others suffered from exposure to the cold or to noxious fumes from the train. (Oliver,*Blues Fell*, 59) Broonzy introduces the character at a moment when the train appears to be stopping to take on water, perhaps providing a chance to jump aboard:

I'm a hobo man, I catch any train I can. (2x)
But when you hear me singin', you know that I'm a hobo man.
I was standin'at a water tank, when a freight train came along. (2x)
I got to thinkin', I got to wonderin', do this freight train go by my home. (DOCD 5052)

"Mr. Conductor Man," recorded in 1932, tells about a man waking up and missing his woman desperately. He is determined to see her and decides to take the train to find her. The song introduces us to an important figure of the railroads, the conductor. The cash-strapped narrator begs to work in lieu of paying the fare. Oliver notes that appeals to railroad men usually fell on deaf ears, most afraid to jeopardize their jobs for the sake of a migrant. Hoboes often faced the water hoses of firemen and the clubs of brakemen trying to knock them off the train. Police would raid hobo camps and use nightsticks to drive them away (*Blues Fell*, 61). Regardless of this reality, Broonzy appeals to the conductor for kindness:

I said, "Mr. Conductor Man, I want to talk to you.
I want to ride your train, from here to Bugaloo.
I'm leaving this morning, man I ain't got my fare.
But I will shovel coal in your engine, till your train get me there." (DOCD 5051; Titon, Downhome, 9)

Oliver wrote that many train lines became renown by their initials or by colorful nicknames like the *Flying Crow*, the *Big Four*, the *Cannonball*, the *Dixie Flyer*, and the *Redball*. They became the personification of power, vigor, and freedom, and singers addressed them with the intimacy of a close friend. Broonzy speaks about several popular train lines in this way, in this case the "C and A Blues:"

Recorded in 1935, "C and A Blues," stands for the Chicago and Arkansas Railroad. It traveled hundreds of miles along the Mississippi River corridor, taking migrants

to and away from loved ones:

> It's a little train leaving out of here, they call the C andA.
> Going to take me home baby, I'm going home tostay.
> Because I'm leaving in the morning, Lord, onthat C and A.
> Babe I'm going back to St. Louis, I'mgoing there to stay. (DOCD 5052; Titon, Down Home,22)

Many of the train lines became part of the folklore of migrants. The popular names of railroad lines became integrated in the common stories of Blacks in the South. The Kansas City Southern Line was known as "The Southern," for example, while the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Road became know as "The Yellow Dog." How these terms became popular is lost to time, but according to Oliver, some people said the term yellow-dog came from the initials for the shortened Yazoo-Delta line; others said it referred to a dog that howled when the train passed by, and still another said it was an insulting term used for company track workers (Oliver, Blues Fell, 67). Whatever the origin, the terms became common reference points in the blues and ones that Broonzy took up in the 1935 recording of "The Southern Blues." He tells the story of a man missing his woman who had taken one of the trains to a different place. The man plans to work to earn money to rejoin his girlfriend. He wants to go to Moorhead, Mississippi, where the Southern and the Yellow Dog cross paths:

> I was standin', lookin' and listenin', watchin' the Southern cross the dog. (2x)
> If my baby didn't catch that Southern, she must have caught that Yellow Dog. (DOCD 5052)

In January 1920, Broonzy took the Illinois Central train to Chicago. He noted several reasons for selecting Chicago as a destination, including family ties, employment possibilities, and the allure of the city's blues culture. Chicago nightclubs attracted talented blues and jazz musicians from across the country, and the industry of race music recordings was in ascendance. By the 1930s, Big Bill would become one of the top recording artists of the urban blues, and release more than 250 titles over a 30-year recording career.

As both a migrant and popular artist, the recordings of Big Bill provide oral/aural evidence of the sentiments of migrant sharecroppers. His songs render sympathy for and legitimacy to the outlook of the working-class migrants. Within the marketing limits of the record industry, he was able to comment on the contemporary issues of migration, urban adjustment, and cultural alienation. As such, his recorded music gives us a window on the mindset of common people dealing with uncommon events, and provides the cultural scholar with another resource for examining the African-American experience.

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