

# Bull City Blues Reflect the Good Times and Bad Luck

By Glenn Hinson

The story Hambone tells could be repeated by any of a number of the bluespeople who once played in Durham. These were working people, men and women who made music in their spare time to entertain themselves and their friends; they played their music by ear and sang songs reflecting their own experience. In addition to their entertainment value, these songs served a far more important social function, for they acted as transmitters of local Black culture and a focal point for group identity. The lyrics addressed themselves directly to the concerns of working-class Blacks, with the slower blues telling of "bad luck and trouble," and the upbeat rags talking about the good time to be had. No matter which type was sung, the songs were always a strong affirmation of Blackness in the face of intense white oppression. It was this common condition which allowed the blues and rags to speak of Black experience in America as well as of local experience in their source of origin.

The distinctive Piedmont style of Black folk music was heard throughout North Carolina at the turn of the century, flourishing in the area's rich tobacco belt. The songsters were to be found wherever people gathered—at corn shuckings, at barn raisings, at country dances—playing their music and singing the songs that reflected their lives.

From the early 1900s to the 1940s, Durham was the home of one of the largest Black musical communities in North Carolina. During the spring and summer months, blues musicians with guitars, banjos, harmonicas and/or washboards could be seen around the Black business sections along Pettigrew and down Fayetteville St., playing on the sides of the unpaved roads or in barber-shops and small grills. With fall came the tobacco auctions, and the bluespeople moved to the Bull City warehouses, where farmers, with cash in hand from recently auctioned tobacco, made up an appreciative and well-paying audience. In the winter, and indeed all through the years, these musicians "ragged the blues" at the many weekend dance-parties in houses from one side of Durham to the other.

The blues that the musicians sang spoke of the physical and emotional conditions of everyday

life in the Black community. Their lyrics were direct and concrete; their themes were solidly based in experience. These were the songs of the Black working-class, expressing their anger and their joy, their failures and their triumphs, their frustrations and their relief. Richard Trice, one of the Durham bluesmen, expressed his understanding of the blues as follows:

I think there are songs made up now that had no parts of their life or anybody else's in the song. And till a song is actually made up from your life, or some experience in somebody else's, then there's not too much to it. And I think that most of the songs made up back in the thirties and forties was some kind of experience in somebody's life that these songs were made from. Because all of 'em carried some kind of message. I never will forget the day, they transferred me to the county jail. Lord, I never will forget the day, they transferred me to the county jail. I had shot the woman I love, and ain't got no one to come go my bail.

"Big House Bound," Blind Boy Fuller

Many of the Durham musicians were among the many Blacks who migrated to the city in an effort to escape the fields harvested by their parents and to seek a more profitable means of living.

For the most part, the bluespeople had very little education, having had to farm or do "public work" at an early age to help boost the family income. In the city, they generally held a series of low-paying menial jobs during the period in question, being as often out of work as gainfully employed. When they could find no jobs (not uncommon during the Depression years!) the bluespeople would turn to their music to help them eke out a living. Usually, however, this music was a part-time activity that promised nothing more than a little spare change and guaranteed entrance to house-parties and dances.

The blues were a social music, heard wherever working-class blacks congregated. On weekend nights, the people would gather at house-parties held all over Durham. Here they could relax and unwind from the long week, drinking, dancing, and sometimes gambling. In many cases, these gatherings were actually means of survival, where, as the bluesman

Arthur Lyons has said, "People could give a party and make a little fast money. They would accomplish this end by selling concessions and bootleg liquor. That liquor had to be there," Lyons adds. "That's what carried the party!" Such house-parties were commonly called "sellins" (or "fish fries" or "chitlin struts," depending on what was sold).

Whereas this sort of party occurred on somewhat of a haphazard basis, there were also those places that could be depended upon to hold a party every weekend. These were the "joints" run by local bootleggers. Their incentive was entirely economic—the parties provided a constant outlet for moonshine and a steady source of income from other concessions. These bootleggers could afford to pay musicians (especially piano players) well to stay with them and to pay off policemen to stay away from them. And of course they also provided a convenient and safe place to gamble, since they were so "protected."

The party might be at a friend's place down in Buggy Bottom, or over at Peachtree Alley, or maybe out at Camel Grove. Or perhaps it's at one of the "houses" run by Minnie Moocher, Big Mattie, or any of the other local bootleggers who worked in and out of Durham. The room you're in is large, with a few chairs off against the walls and a battered upright piano in the corner. A jar of moonshine for the musicians lays on the piano top. In a small room off to one side there's a table laden with barbeque, fried chicken and fish, chitlins, cakes, and maybe some ice cream, all for sale. Behind that, a woman pours bootleg from a jar into small glasses. There's a one-eyed man tinkling the keys on the piano—that would be Murphy Evans—a guitarist picking a rag lead, a second guitarist playing the bass lines, and a washboard player rubbing his board with thimbles on his fingers. As the night wears on, the musicians take breaks to dance or eat, and are replaced by others with banjos or harmonicas. The room is crammed with people dancing the "Charleston Strut" or the "Hollywood Skip." Every once in a while a man will break into a fast buckdance, and the musicians will oblige him by stopping their music.

Arthur Lyons remembers: "Yeah, they'd shake a house, man. It could



PEG LEG SAM

be a good house, stationary, you know, and they'd make that house pure rock. . . . Along the time you'd get to playing a song and they'd get to dancing, they would never want you to turn them loose. A lot of times I'd be getting ready to sign off and they's holler, 'Keep it up! Don't stop now!' Lord, I'd be getting so tired seems like I was out of breath. I'd say, 'Y'all must got 'lectricity in your legs or something.' They'd never get tired."

A couple of times in the evening, a hat is passed for the musicians, and it is returned to the top of the piano filled with nickels and dimes. As the night passes, the musicians play fewer rags and more blues. The dances slow down accordingly, and everyone's doing the "mess-around"

Says, I'm gwine up town, hat in my hand, looking for the woman ain't got no man. It's baby lookin

for a needle in the sand, lookin for the woman ain't got no man. Oh, rag! Oh, rag! Rag, baby, say do that rag, rag! Rag, baby, say do that rag! —"Rag Mama Rag," Blind Boy Fuller

or the "slow drag." At about two in the morning, the host signals the end of the party, and the musicians close with a spiritual, sung with all the force of the lowest blues.

The tobacco warehouses provided another center of musical activity. There, every tobacco season, Black and white farmers from all over the Carolina piedmont would gather to auction their tobacco. Many of these farmers would literally spend days in the warehouse, waiting to sell to the highest bidder. They provided a captive (and otherwise bored) audience for the musicians, who were assured of good tips when the tobacco was sold. Peg Leg Sam, a harmoica-player who often played with medicine shows in the Durham warehouses, commented, "Any musician any good would come to Durham to play in the warehouses."

The vast space of the tobacco warehouses engulfs the farmers sitting between the long straight rows of tobacco bales. As these farmers talk amongst themselves, others are arriving with their tobacco-laden mule-drawn

wagons or second-hand trucks. They start the long process of weighing the bales and getting them ready for the sales they hope will come tomorrow with the weekend. Many of the farmers have been here since Tuesday, and are still holding out for higher tobacco prices. They've spent their nights sleeping on blankets spread over flattened tobacco bales in the bare quarters on the side of the warehouse. Off near the entrance, two Black men, one with a guitar slung over his back and the other with a washboard under his arm, amble in and take a place against the wall. Within a minute, the quiet warehouse echoes with the sound of an upbeat rag. A crowd, as much Black as white, begins to form around the musicians, urging them on with their cries: "Play that thing now!" "Make that guitar pure talk!" Those who have some

change toss it into the cup on the end of the guitar's neck, requesting that a favorite tune be played. The bluesmen play blues, hillbilly songs, and some vaudeville numbers. Within fifteen minutes in strolls Pud Lucas, a warehouse favorite. He tosses his hat on the floor and launches into the fastest buck-dance ever seen in Durham. Quarters fly into his hat, and those that miss are scooped up by Pud, who never even misses a step.

The blues musicians were an integral part of the Black community. Their songs reflected the pulse of Black life in Durham. They were heard on the street, at parties, and at the warehouses. The Black theater would hire blues pianists to play behind the films; the local cafes would welcome bluesmen, giving them free food and drink in exchange for entertaining their customers; circuses and medicine shows would employ bluesmen to draw their crowds. The musicians addressed the overwhelming problems facing poor Blacks. Yet they could at best offer only partial answers for the bluespeople were caught in the same system of oppression as their neighbors. As Peg Leg Sam puts it, "I was born for hard luck."

For the most part, the blues singers no longer have an active role in the Black community. Some say that this is due to the destruction of Hayti by urban renewal, and the subsequent "killing of Durham's soul." Others blame it on the police, who prohibited street singing in the forties. Still others simply attribute it to changing times and musical tastes. They all agree, however, on one point—that the conditions which caused the bluespeople to sing the blues have not gone, and are still very much with us.

The foregoing article is a condensed version of "Bull City Blues" from the N. C. Bicentennial Folklife Festival Program Booklet which will be on sale for 50 cents at the festival. The research for the article was sponsored by grant number 76-19-2435 from the N. C. Bicentennial.

The Bull City Blues group will be gathered together during the festival on the Piedmont Stage at 12 noon, Saturday, June 5th.

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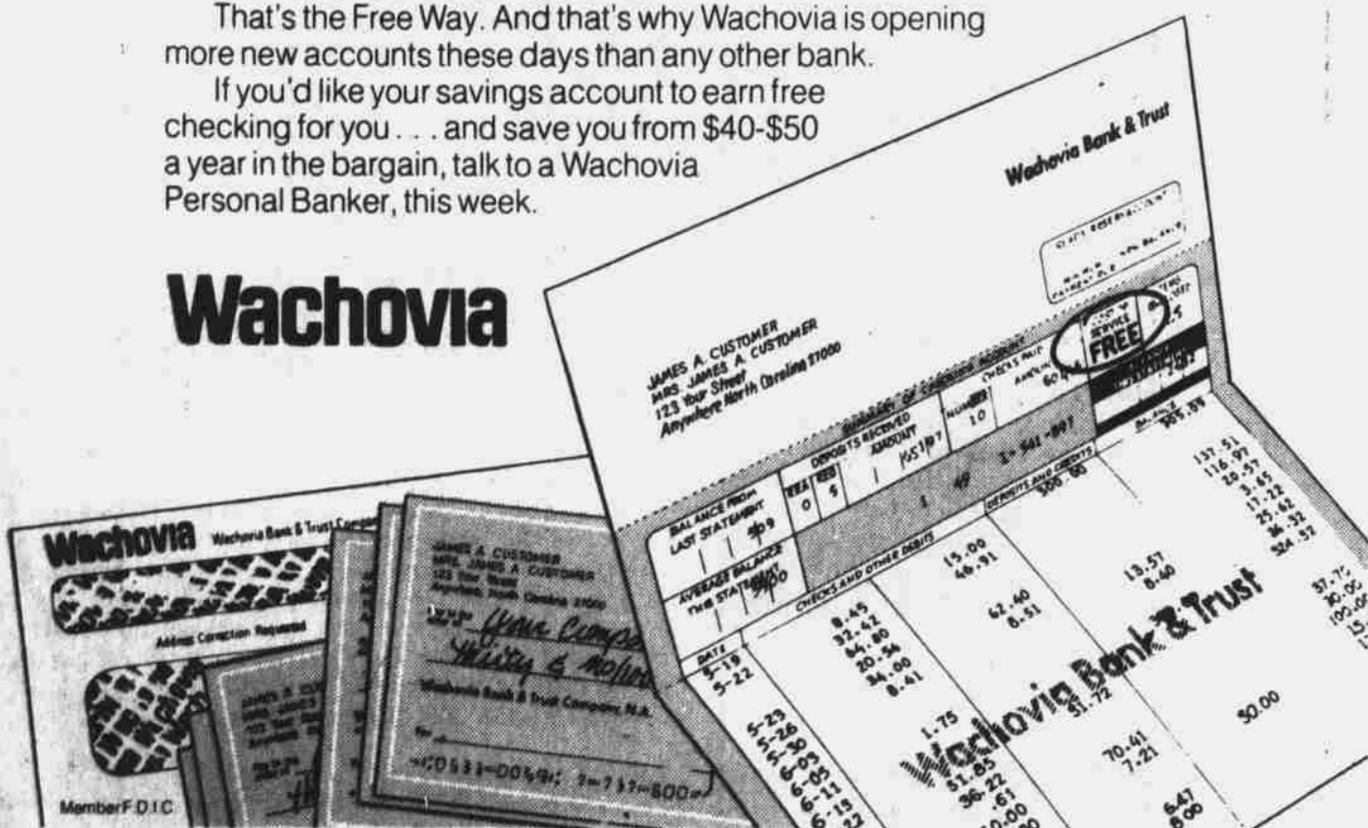
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The Kings Club was chartered by the state of North Carolina as a non profit making corporation October 9, 1969. Membership in the corporation at this time was twelve members. We are now very proud to have a membership of twenty-two young men.

The purposes for which the corporation was organized are:

- To provide recreation for the members, their families, and the public, including the furnishing of equipment and/or facilities. Games of skill athletic and other type contests and exhibitions for participation by the members, their families, and the public be provided and/or supported.
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