

Recovering Lost Voices: The Urban Migration and the Blues of William “Big Bill” Broonzy

(失われた声を取り戻して：アフリカ系アメリカ人の大移住とウィリアム[ビッグ・ビル]ブルーンジーのブルース)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: 1915年から1960年にかけて、アメリカでは、アフリカ系アメリカ人が、プランテーションから都市部へと大挙して移住した。研究者たちは、従来この出来事を、都市の発展または人種関係の観点から考察してきた。しかし近年になって、移住者自身の感情に焦点が当てられつつある。移住したアフリカ系アメリカ人たちの視点をよりよく理解しようと、研究者たちは、新たな情報源として大衆文化に注目するようになってきた。本論は、ブルース・シンガーの大御所、ウィリアム(ビッグ・ビル)ブルーンジー(1893-1958)の作品を考察することで、この分野の研究に寄与しようとする試みである。

本論では、移住者であり人気アーティストでもあったこの時期のブルース・シンガーたち—特に、ビッグ・ビル・ブルーンジー—の存在は、「ブルース・ピープル」の心の内奥を理解するうえで重要な文化財であることを指摘している。録音されたビッグ・ビルの歌は、歴史上重大な転機に直面した黒人労働者階級の心境をその声で歌い上げている。本論では、移住、都市生活への順応、経済不況などを背景とし、列車での移動や家庭生活両方にまつわる題材を取り上げた1930年代のビッグ・ビルの作品に焦点を当てている。

1893年、ミシシッピのコットン・プランテーションで生まれ、ミシシッピやアーカンソーの農園で農業労働者として働きながら育ったビッグ・ビルは、少年時代にヴァイオリンを習い、陽気なエンタテイナーとして評判を得るようになった。第一次世界大戦中、アーカンソーを離れ、アメリカ陸軍で兵役に服する。戦争によって産業が拡大し、農場から都市へのアフリカ系アメ

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リカ人の移住が急速に増え、第一次大規模移住となったが、ビッグ・ビルもまたこの移住者の一人だった。1920年、アーカンソー州からシカゴの街へと移ったビッグ・ビルは、同様に移住した推定50万人に及ぶ南部からの農場労働者たちと同じ道をたどったのだ。

この移住の第一波は、その後絶え間なく続くアフリカ系アメリカ人の都市部への流入の基礎を築いた。たとえば、1920年代と30年代には、当時のひどい経済状態にもかかわらず、「約束の土地」である都市部へと推定150万人が移動したとされている。この時期、ビッグ・ビルはベストセラーのレコード歌手となっており、彼の音楽は、絶え間ない不安と向き合う人々の助けとなった。第二次世界大戦の勃発によって、第二次の急速な大都市移住が始まり、アフリカ系アメリカ人の都会人化が達成されたのである。こうして何十年にもわたり、ブルース歌手はアフリカ系アメリカ人に勇気と決意の念を起こす言葉と音楽を与え、人々は踊って沈んだ気持ち (blues) を忘れることができたのである。

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 first wave of mass migration lasted from 1910 to 1940 and saw 1,750,000 Blacks leave the rural South for cities in the South and North. The exodus doubled the population of African-Americans living outside the South and swelled the urban ghettos. From 1910 to 1920, for example, 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 movement would lay the foundation for the second wave beginning with World War II and continuing for decades afterward.

Contemporary social scientists concluded that the first wave stemmed from economic and social concerns, with the major reason being poverty. The plantation system evolved to keep farm workers in debt, but even in better circumstances the land could not support the populations of Blacks or Whites. In addition, farm workers had to deal with the ravages of floods, droughts, boll weevils infestations, and other natural disasters; and compete with machines and,

during the depression period, federal government policy of crop reduction. W E B. 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, 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).

Farm workers also struggled against the harsh obstacles 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, particularly in the North, where reduced European immigration caused by World War I had resulted in labor shortages. In addition, the cities provided access to better schools, voting rights, civil rights, and urban culture; and during the years of the New Deal, 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*, 129-34).

In recent years, scholars have examined this event from the perspective of participants. For example, Jim Grossman explored the deliberate manner in which migrants came to the decision to leave the rural 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. 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." First, he is a best-selling recording star of Depression-era blues. Second, his songs provide oral/aural commentary on the sentiments of the working-class at a critical juncture in the experience of Blacks. This article will examine aspects of his life and songs, focusing on the topics of migration and urban adaptation.

The Dynamics of Migration

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. He 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; 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).

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 means of relocation are captured in many of the blues songs. According to Oliver, the topic of "leaving" is a dominant idea in the pre-war 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 expressed 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: The train was recognized as a means of psychic escape in the spirituals, for example. 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 migration, the railroad took on new meaning as the major vehicle of national travel and as an important employer of black men. As such, it is mentioned in numerous blues compositions. For example, one study of African-American social songs from 1930 to the 1960s discovered the railroad related to issues of family separation, and employment—hiring thousands of people as firemen, track layers, maids and porters (Oliver, *Blues Fell*, 58; Richardson, “Black Workers”)

Broonzy describes people taking trains to and from loved ones, heading to the North as well as to the South, waiting for trains at depots and along bends in the tracks, and prevailing upon railroad police and conductors to let them ride. Collectively the songs portray a people on the move, riding the rails with a sense of adventure, desperation, wonderment, and watching in despair as the train carried loved ones away. Consider the following stanza in 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 bad times. While the narrator talks about the freedom of the hobo to ride trains at whim, the reality of life for a 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 the safety of the baggage cars, or to 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, the lamed blues singer Luzana Cholly; others suffered from exposure to the cold or to noxious fumes from the train (Oliver, *Blues Fell*, 59).

Broonzy introduces his 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 his woman 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 got up this morning, hear the train whistle blow.
Lord, I thought about my baby, I sure did want to go.
Lord, I grabbed my suitcase, I dropped it on the floor.
I could see the conductor, he waving his hands to go
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; Tilton, *Downhome*, 9)

Oliver wrote that many train lines became renowned 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, such as the Mobile and Western:

"Mobile and Western Line" (1935)

Have you ever looked down that Mobile and Western Line?
Have you ever looked down that Mobile and Western Line?
And your plumb good woman keep a-rollin' 'cross your mind

(DOCD 5052)

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 known 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 jumped aboard a passing Illinois Central Railroad train and began his journey to Chicago. He first stopped in St. Louis, where he worked for a month to earn money for the ticket to Chicago: "I worked aroun' there for a while. Then I got me some money an' I lef' from there an' I come on into Chicago" (Lomax, transcript). 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. He arrived in Chicago on February 8, for example, and later that month Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" was released and went on to become a best-selling record. With that event the blues record industry began to look for new talent and newspapers began carrying reviews and advertisements. Upon arrival, Broonzy found work with the Pullman Company (Barlow, *Looking*, 292; Oakley, *Devil's*, 101, 112):

I had a brother up there and he knowed a friend and he called him up that night He asked me, "You wanta go to work?" I told him, "Yeah." So in about four days I got a job at the America Car Foundry and I worked there for about two years (Lomax, *Land*, 442)

Broonzy also selected Chicago for political reasons: He admired the hard-hitting reports of the *Chicago Defender* and the risk people would take to bring a copy to the rural districts of Arkansas. Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson talked about the role of the *Defender* in a wide-ranging discussion with Alan Lomax. They noted that a man who could read the *Defender* was seen as a threat—or a "bad Negro"—to many Whites because "he would open the eyes of a lot of Negroes, tell 'em things that they didn't know." Broonzy recalled how this type of person would smuggle the *Defender* into the rural districts and read it to other sharecroppers. But what Whites saw as a "bad Negro," Blacks saw as a "Race Man," or the kind of person who was not afraid to fight white people for his rights and for those of his people. Memphis Slim supported the observation of Broonzy with his own story of people secretly reading the paper in a restaurant in Marigold, Mississippi:

They had a restaurant in there and in back they had a peephole. And I thought they were gambling back there or something, and I went back there to see was they gambling. In fact, I was kinda stranded, I want to go back there and shoot a little crap and make me a little stake. And you can imagine what they were doing back there. They were reading the *Chicago Defender*, and they had a man on the door, a lookout man... And if a white man or something came into the restaurant, they'd stick the *Defender* in the stove, burn it up and start playing checkers (Lomax, "Blues")

Their admiration for the *Chicago Defender* was shared by most African-Americans. Founded as a local weekly in 1905, the paper was carefully managed by editor Robert S. Abbott, who made it the leading newspaper of black America. The *Defender* gained readers by copying the sensationalist tactics pioneered by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst: banner headlines, often in red ink, stories of outrageous crimes committed against blacks in the South, promotion of black entertainment, and hard-hitting editorials on racial justice. The newspaper started a national edition aimed at readers in the South, relying on Pullman porters

to deliver bundles at stops along the way. Its circulation rose from 300 in 1905 to 282,000 in 1920, with a large segment of its readership in the Mississippi Delta. It promoted the exodus with such stunts as declaring May 15, 1917 as the start of "The Great Northern Drive." A noticeable surge in migration the following week bore witness to the influence of the newspaper. The men and women who dared to smuggle the newspaper into the plantation districts and share it with illiterate sharecroppers were respected as powerful figures. As Memphis Slim concluded: "That's what they really called a bad Negro, a Negro that had nerve enough to smuggle the *Chicago Defender* down in the state of Mississippi where they didn't allow them to put 'em off there" (Lomax, "Blues"; Barlow, *Looking*, 288).

Chicago, as the economic powerhouse of the Midwest, interacted with the Mississippi Delta economy in many ways. For example, Grossman wrote that as the terminus of the Illinois Central Railroad, the city was the source of black baseball teams that toured the South, and was the center of black business. It also was the source of nationally known mail-order companies, and the site of good jobs in the steel mills and meat packinghouses. Finally it was the place where relatives and friends had settled over the years (Grossman, *Hope*, 99; Spear, *Chicago*, 129-30). With his decision to leave, Broonzy turned his back on his family and on a dream of freedom through independent farming that had captured the imagination of Blacks since emancipation. He, like millions of other sharecroppers, concluded that his best chance of achieving a good life could be found in the city.

He arrived to a city where migrants clustered on the Southside, specifically between 22nd and 39th Streets, from Wentworth Avenue to State Street—the main commercial thoroughfare. They had to deal with a broad range of problems: migrants had to compete for a limited number of apartments, for example. A 1917 study found 664 applicants for housing and only 50 available units, such population pressures caused rents to increase by as much as 50 percent. Many people, disoriented by the migration, turned to social service agencies and churches for help. Some discovered their farms or small town mechanical skills unsuitable for urban industry and had to retrain for industrial jobs. Southern professionals like teachers and clergy lost the status they had in their home communities.

Nevertheless, migrants enjoyed new social freedoms such as going to amusement parks and movie theaters, and sending children to public schools. While they enjoyed more freedom socially, they still had to deal with racial discrimination in various public accommodations. Many also need the time and space to

heal psychological wounds from the brutal experience of living in the South, and the turmoil of relocation and urban adaptation ("The Truth," *Black Protest*, 68-72).

Black people born in Chicago and newcomers from the South often viewed each other with suspicion. Migrants continued to identify with their region of birth and regard it with a type of love-hate sentiment. Broonzy commented on missing the South in numerous songs, provoking a mood of sentimentality, if not reality. His effort to capitalize on the nostalgia of migrants may have been appealing in song, but it could not counter the facts that motivated people to leave. In this way, his songs captured the sense of conflict migrants felt over having to leave their homes:

"I'm a Southern Man" (1936)

On my way to Memphis, on my way to Memphis, I'm gonna catch that

I C. train, now, pretty mama.

I'm on my way to Memphis, I'm gonna catch that I C. train.

Yeah, I'm a Southern man and I don't deny my name.

(DOCD 5127)

While these songs may have brought migrants emotional release, they portray a false sense of nostalgia. The fact is that few people saw returning to the South, particularly the rural areas, as a viable option. And not even the post-war publicity campaigns of southern leaders could convince substantial numbers of migrants to return. Regardless of the depths of the depression in the cities, and the exacting toll the mass movement took on individuals and families, sharecroppers would continue to leave the South for years to come. One migrant, asked about the campaigns to encourage Blacks to return, said with disbelief: "Anyone who says conditions now are better than before the war is crazy" (Hill, "Why Southern," *Black Protest*, 186)

The Effect of Migration on Family and Relationships

African-Americans have grappled with problems of broken families since the days of slavery. While many families have survived intact, far too many have had to deal with the legacy of illegitimate births, separations, and abandonment. The

decades of mass migration placed additional strains on the already weakened family structure. Oliver notes that one cause of failure in marriage was the early age at which sharecroppers opted to marry, or were arranged to be married. Because of conditions such as economic need and inadequate school provisions, many people got “hitched” as teenagers—and sometimes as pre-teens; in Mississippi, for example, it was legal for 12-year old girls to consent to marriage. As a result, many couples discovered that they were too immature to form a lasting union (Oliver, *Blues Fell*, 85).

Broonzy was married at the age of 21 through an arrangement of his father and the family of Gertrude Embrie, a 17-year old woman in his church. The circumstances behind the marriage are unclear, but a number of considerations seemed to move his family to make the decision. One was the social expectation that it was time for him to become a responsible family man. However, his father’s actions may have had a self-serving motivation as well—he wanted to stop his son from visiting a favored prostitute! Broonzy recalled his father encouraging the marriage after he began frequenting a whorehouse, saying he wanted to “make a man” of the young Broonzy before the whores ruined him. According to Broonzy, the prostitute—who he called Mary Crow—was an older woman who he met by coincidence. One day his mother gave him \$3 in appreciation of his hard work on the farm and told him to buy whatever he wanted in town. Broonzy went to see the woman twice and told his father that he wanted to marry her. Frank Broonzy condemned the idea and ordered him to marry Embrie (Broonzy, *Big Bill*, 62).

Perhaps this is only a story of Big Bill’s fancy, but he went on to develop it further: he said that he heeded the instructions of his father, but only after seeing Mary one last time. He was in her room when he heard someone knock on the door. A man asked to see Mary but the madam said that he would have to wait until she finished with another client. The man asked who Mary was with and the madam said coyly, “The best ploughhand on your farm.” Broonzy realized then that the voice was his father’s, and that he may have had other reasons for arranging the wedding. Whatever the case, Broonzy and Gertrude were married on November 11, 1914. Her background and the nature of her relationship to Broonzy is unknown with the current information available; however, his recollections leave the impression of a hard-working, practical woman who tended to be bossy. They probably had a daughter named Catherine (Broonzy, *Big Bill*, 62-63, 103-04).

We was church members together and we was always around different places together. I liked her and she like me, so she said Fact of the business, she proved it because she started a family. We had chicken and cake and ice cream at our wedding (Broonzy, *Big Bill*, 62)

As a married man, it appears that Broonzy tried to live up to the image of a traditional family man—to be good sharecropper, church member (though not without lapses), and family provider. At least in part because of his new status, he gave up playing the fiddle at dances. He also found a calling to preach the word of God, and like other bluesman, found himself torn between the music of the devil and the spreading the gospel. Whether in music or scripture, Broonzy clearly had a sense of mission, a belief that he had something to say of importance. At this point, he felt preaching to be the strongest pull but soon he would return to the blues as a platform for expressing his views. Broonzy preached for four years when not sharecropping and doing odd jobs. He worked with Louis Carter, his partner from fiddling days, who now served as a deacon in Broonzy's "church"—but the call to preach cooled when no one attended his sermons. He blamed his lack of education as the reason for his failure, saying, "I can't read or write, and I'm trying to lead people and tell them the right way and don't know how and what is right myself" (Broonzy, *Big Bill*, 35)

His stories reveal little about his family life at this time, except for occasional references. For example, he recalled telling bedtime stories to his daughter, Catherine. One of her favorite was Little Red Riding Hood, and another was a grisly folktale about two characters named One-Eyed Abraham and Black Saddy: Black Saddy has a fight with her husband, One-Eyed Abraham, and vows to seek revenge. One day as he sits playing cards with friends, she sneaks up on his blind side and cuts off his head with a razor. But the blade is so sharp that One-Eyed Abraham doesn't realize he's been decapitated until his friends convince him. At their urging, he shakes his head and it tumbles to the floor. He realizes at that point that he is dead (Broonzy, *Big Bill*, 103-04).

The story is so farfetched that Catherine chastised him for "telling lies" (According to Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men*, it was common in black folk culture to call exaggerations or tall tales "lies.") Other than this brief glimpse into their early relationship, however, there is little information about his daughter. Perhaps his memory of these years faded with time, perhaps the issue was not raised by interviewers, or perhaps it was too painful to discuss. Whatever the

reason, Broonzy appears to have spent little time with her—when he lived with them he hustled in the fields and at dances—then they were separated for two years when Broonzy was inducted into the army, and then he migrated to Chicago.

After the army experience, Broonzy returned to Arkansas to face marital problems. He discovered that during his absence relations had soured with Gertrude. How the family had maintained itself when he was in France is unclear. One can assume that Broonzy's army salary combined with Gertrude's work and perhaps family assistance enabled her and Catherine to make ends meet. But when he came back Gertrude began pressuring him to find better paying work on the railroads. Broonzy felt that she bossed him around far too much, saying, "My wife was telling me what I should do about money matters." His inability to find (or want to look for) better work than sharecropping led to a sense of futility that only increased feelings of alienation from his wife. "Things were different between me and Gertrude," he said. "It was like she didn't sympathize with me no more" (Lomax, 436-38).

The difficulty WWI veterans had reintegrating into society is beyond the scope of this work, but many soldiers believed civilians incapable of comprehending what they had experienced. After his time in the army, Broonzy would later tell Alan Lomax, he resisted the efforts of all people to tell him what to do (foremost with whites, but also with his wife) and perhaps dealt with post-war anxiety in silence. Before the army he followed whatever his wife told him to do; after the army, he felt that she attempted to order him around too much—all of this turmoil came to a head one night in the winter of 1920:

I went home that evenin'. She was tellin' me 'bout what I should do, 'bout money matters, that I should got [*sic*] to the railroad an' get a job. . . I says, "Now you been tellin' me what to do aroun' here 'bout long enough." I says, "I'm gonna show you what I'm gonna do." So that night a freight comin' through and I caught that freight, see? And I lef' (Lomax, transcript)

Whether he actually left in so cold a fashion or simply felt like leaving in that way is open to speculation. But clearly tensions had built to a breaking point and he could no longer stay with her—or in Arkansas. His sense of estrangement was made clear in recordings years after the incidents of 1920, showing that they resonated with listeners as well:

"Married Life's a Pain" (1936)

I lay down unlucky, I woke up, I had to bear the blame (2x)

Yes, I'm broke, down and out, man, ain't married life a pain.

(DOCD 5126)

Broonzy found himself in a potentially fatal dilemma, pushing back against the social forces that wanted to put him in the confined but secure "place" of a black man in the South:

Fact of the business, after I found out that there was more of the world than just Arkansas and the other people was living in other parts of the world and doing a dum sight better than what I was, which I had thought I had been doing good down there, I said, "What the heck, down here a man ain't nothing nohow" (Lomax, *Land*, 436-37)

The migration placed great strain on individuals and families as evidenced by the large number of songs on relationship problems. Broonzy describes the social and emotional impact in numerous recordings, many portraying anguish over feelings abandoned, missing loved ones, and wanting to go home. They chronicle the state of mind of displaced sharecroppers in ways both poignant and poetic:

"Baby Don't You Remember" (1939)

When we were schoolmates, nobody could keep us apart.

Now, since you've got to the big city, gal, you done got smart

Now, don't you remember me, I begged your mother, baby, for you?

Now, have you forgot, baby, what you promised to do?

(DOCD 5130)

Broonzy spoke about infidelity that could occur when a couple separates for extended periods, and in particular the temptations that an attractive woman can face when left alone in the city:

"Tell Me What You Been Doing" (1935)

Come here, mama, tell your daddy what you been doin' (2x)

Now, your stockin's all twisted and your shoes on wrong

Where them other clothes, gal, you had on?

Now, come here, mama, tell your daddy what you been doin'.
Tell your daddy what you been doin'.

(DOCD 5126)

He also spoke about the possibility of relationships turning violent. The songs of domestic threats and abuse illustrate a larger reality of couples ill-equipped to deal with the pressures of poverty and dislocation, the desire to control unfaithful spouses, or the passions that could arise from consuming too much alcohol and drugs:

“I’ll Start Cutting on You” (1938)

I got a gal, she is fat and fine.

She says she got a knife as long as mine

But she done talk until she made me mad

I’m gonna give here one of the worst cuttin’s that she have ever had.

(DOCD 5129)

Migrants had to deal with cultural and social dislocation, and the existential turmoil of modernism, of making a rapid transition from an agrarian way of life to the impersonal urban industrial environment. Broonzy comments on the resulting sense of loneliness and alienation:

“Mean Old World” (1937)

And it’s a mean old world to live, I’m just travelin’ through. (2x)

Yeah, sometime I get so blue till I don’t know what to do

(DOCD 5128)

Finally, Broonzy makes a worthy effort to comfort his listeners by addressing the emotional consequence of their social experience—the blues.

“Shoo Blues” (1947)

I’m gonna write myself a letter, I’m gonna tell my blues to shoo. (2x)

I’m gonna talk sweet to myself, hoo, lord, and make believe it come from
you

(BDCD 6047)

As both a migrant and a top recording artist, the story of Big Bill Broonzy provides both the history of an important Depression-era blues artist and, through his recorded music, evidence of the sentiments of migrant sharecroppers. His songs provided a forum of sympathy and legitimacy to the outlook of the working-class migrants, and encouraged them to carry on. Within the marketing limits of the record industry, he was able to comment on the relevant topics of migration, urban adaptation, social separation, and alienation. As such, his life story and recorded music gives a window on the mindset of common people dealing with uncommon events.

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