“Pony Blues”--Charley Patton (1929)

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Essay by Edward Komara and Gayle Dean Wardlow (guest post)*

Charley Patton

“Pony Blues” was one of three songs that Mississippi Delta bluesman Charley [Charlie] Patton (c.1891-1934) was long remembered for by his aging listeners some 30 years after his death, along with the recordings “Banty Rooster Blues” and “Screamin’ and Hollerin’ the Blues.” He recorded them for Paramount Records in June 1929. “Pony Blues” was issued with “Banty Rooster Blues” on the shellac 78-rpm release Paramount 12792, and it was a hit.

By then, Patton was a 22-year veteran of Delta music, performing at house frolics, picnics, suppers, cafes, sawmill joints, and barrelhouses. He was thoroughly a Mississippi man, born in the hill country town of Edwards (west of Jackson), and raised in the Delta on Dockery Farms. Choosing not to grow cotton like his family, Patton embarked on his performing career around 1908. He performed occasionally for white landowners, and he played on the plantations for the sharecroppers. But his records show a consummate bluesman who performed mainly for African Americans, and his lyrics indicate that he often played at the large barrelhouses who could pay his lucrative fees, instead of the humble shacks where frolics were held.

“He taught ‘em all!” said his sister Viola Patton Cannon to interviewers in the 1960s. Patton’s mentorship to younger musicians abided in their memories of him, even after his musical influence waned during the eras of rhythm and blues and rock and roll. Howlin’ Wolf and David “Honeyboy” Edwards thought the world of him, and Sam Chatmon claimed him as a brother. Others like Eddie “Son” House and Eugene Powell held grudges, but nonetheless they still acknowledged his impact on them. Echoes of Patton’s music may be heard in the early records of Big Joe Williams and Robert Johnson, the last generation of musicians who heard him in person. Some rock acts of the late 1960s and 1970s also gave Patton his due. Canned Heat, whose members included scholar/musicians Al Wilson and Henry Vestine, covered several Patton songs. Linda Ronstadt’s early backing group The Stone Ponys had named themselves after a 1934 Patton song. John Fogerty (formerly of Creedence Clearwater Revival) helped to fund Patton’s gravestone in Holly Ridge, Mississippi.

What made “Pony Blues” a 78-rpm record worth buying and playing often? For one thing, it had a peppy, upbeat melody; it was not a lament like W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues.” It was very much for African American dancers, who were likely to move according to the steps of dances with names like the shimmy-she-wobble and the one-step. Patton also seems to be singing and playing as much for listeners as for dancers. Analysts have counted up to six melodic strains in the 18-lyric phrases on the three-minute recording. Rather than just singing loudly, Patton shifts

among various grades of vocal dynamics. Deftly he fills the weak spots of the melody with strong beats from his guitar. As Patton biographers Gayle Wardlow and Stephen Calt write of his record, "His timing is a wonder to behold, and he handles his instrument like a toy, producing percussive and timbral contrasts by choking strings for split seconds, muting individual bass notes, and tapping his guitar percussively."

There is also much to be enjoyed among the lyrics of "Pony Blues." They are sung to the standard AAB phrasing pattern, in which the first lyric phrase (A) is repeated (A), then a closing lyric (B) completes the pattern. To fit the lyrics within the dance rhythms, Patton will drop, playfully, syllables during the repeated first line. So a lyric like "Got a brand new Shetland, man, she already trained" is altered during the repeat to "Brand new, Shetland, baby, already trained." Some of the lyrics convey the times. "Hello Central, the matter with your line?" about telephone service is apparently taken from Handy's 1915 hit "Hesitation Blues." Other words suggest the changing modes transportation. Shetland ponies were the desire of Mississippi boys through the 1910s, full-sized ponies were for teenagers and men. Yet they were replaced by the "morning train" that carried off friends and women to other places.

The flip side of the 78, "Banty Rooster Blues" may be slower than "Pony Blues," but as another of Patton's signature songs, it cannot be overlooked. It too has lyrics to the AAB scheme, but several stanzas are in a question and answer format, such as "What you want with a rooster? He won't crow 'fore day." / "What you want with a man when he won't do nothin' he say?" Patton accompanies himself at the guitar by fretting his tones with a bottleneck slide, a practice distinctive to the Delta. At the frolics, suppers and barrelhouses, this song would have been danced to the slow drag, a contact dance in which the man and woman hugged each other and would grind their bodies to the rhythm.

The commercial success of the "Pony Blues" 78 in the summer of 1929 led to additional Paramount recording sessions for Patton during the following winter and summer. Some of the songs he committed to wax were mainstays in his Delta songbag, others were on-the-spot adaptations of blues that were proven successes. "Rattlesnake Blues" from the winter of 1930 and "Dry Well Blues" that August used the "Pony Blues" melody; neither record sold as well as "Pony Blues," likely due to the emerging Great Depression. But "Pony Blues" remained Patton's calling-card song. When the American Recording Company hosted Patton for a recording visit in January-February 1934, it was clear it wanted a "Pony Blues" of its own. Patton obliged with "Stone Pony Blues," in which he sang, "I got me a stone pony, and I don't ride Shetlands no more." A little over two months later, Patton died of a heart condition. The reissue of "Stone Pony Blues" and 11 other Patton sides on the first Patton LP, "The Immortal Charlie Patton" on the Origin Jazz Library label (OJL-1), led to a rediscovery by white blues fans of his rollicking career.

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Since 1962, Gayle Wardlow has researched Mississippi blues. His other books are (with Stephan Calt) "King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton" (Newton, NJ: Rock Chapel Press, 1988) and (with Bruce Conforth) "Up Jumped The Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson" (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2019).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.