

EAR PLAYERS

WHEN you play music by ear, it don't mean you wiggle your ears while you're playing it. You just use your ears to remember what you hear. You sort of write down a bunch of sounds somewhere in your head and save them for future use. Sometimes you hear a tune and catch some of the words, and for a long time you go around with it roaring through your head like a lost steamboat.

My mother was an ear musician. She lived seven miles out of the little county seat, Okemah, Oklahoma. Songs meant a lot to her and she collected hundreds of them in her head, and she chorded on the piano and sung tales and stories that taught me the history of our section of the country, its weather, cyclones, pretty women, love affairs, outlaws, disasters, and hopes for the better world that's coming.

I'd lay on the floor with my chin in my hands and soak up every drop. Then, when she'd quit singing, I'd jump up and run out of the house, down through the henlot, climb the high rusty fence, and chase out into the timber on the creek bottom to listen to the words and tunes trickle through my mind, and vision a thousand reels of moving pictures—outlaws, fugitives, and dead-shot pioneer women, cowboys, Indians, horse thieves, floods, and a million other things. There was the ballad about the Sherman Cyclone:

*You could see the storm approaching,
The cloud looked death-like black,
And through our little city
It left a dreadful track. . . .*

WOODY GUTHRIE

And I recollect the western version of the old song, Blackjack Davey:

*'Twas late last night when my lord come home
Inquiring for his lady,
And the only answer that he got,
She's gone with the Blackjack Davey,
She's gone with the Blackjack Dave. . . .*

Off he went on his buckskin mare, his hundred-dollar saddle, and chased her down. But she stuck to her guns and she told him:

*Yes, I've give up your diamond rings,
Your butlers and your ladies;
And I've give up your feathery bed
To ride with the Blackjack Davey,
And sing with the Blackjack Dave. . . .*

*When he got home to his money bags,
To his butler and his lady,
The tears come a-trickling down his face
When he thought of the Blackjack Davey,
And the song of the Blackjack Dave.*

I'm not a history expert; the story and the tune of this old song might be tracked back to King Somebody VIII, the dark ages, or plumb back to old King Tut. But the main thing is that the people of the past have used songs to speak their mind, have their fun, do their courting and make their work easier.

I recall that my eighth year in school a mighty good thing happened to me. There was a little Negro shine boy that worked in a barber-shop on my road to school.

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I walked in to get the shears put to me and clumb up in the chair and sat down. Some years before, Jinks, the barber had fought me to a standstill, hogtied and hobbled me, and give me my first haircut. He'd clipped me ever since. But he'd played a whole raft of mean jokes on me, and I hated him in a way. He'd told me some awful funny things, and I liked him in a way. He always pulled some kind of a wisecrack when a customer got in his chair, and this time he told me, "Well, you know, this is sort of a special sales day, and we're not giving any kind of hair cuts except bald-headed ones. . . ."

I asked him what he meant. And he said, "That's the only kind we got left . . . makes you bald-headed. Wouldn't you like to be bald-headed for a while?"

I jumped out of his chair and hollered back at him, "No, I don't! I just want a hair cut. Common everyday one. That's all. I'm gonna tell my dad on you, and he'll come up here and go through this old place like a steam engine!"

Jinks kidded me out of my hot-headed spell and got me back up in the chair. As he went to pull the lever on the side and adjust it to the right pitch and slant, I caught my finger in a hinge and it felt like my arm was being pulled off. I yelled bloody murder, but I couldn't get loose. Jinks didn't know what was the matter. He thought maybe I was fooling him again, and he just reared back and laughed. But when he looked down and saw the blood running onto the floor, he threw the chair back into a position that turned the finger loose, and it was mashed flat and white, red and dripping. I held it in my hand and wouldn't let anybody see it.

Nobody in the room could quiet me down. The more I squalled, the louder I got. I disturbed everybody in that end of town, except one person.

That was the Negro shoe shine boy.

He was laying outside in the sun on an old whittled-up bench that had the history of the Oklahoma land rush carved in it, if you could figure out the code. He was all raggedy, in old baggy overalls. He was blowing a long, lonesome blues on the harmonica.

With tears running down my face like water, I held my hand back so that Jinks and my dad, who had come on the run from the pool hall where he was shooting a game of snooker, could get a look at the finger. They said it was broke, and I'd have to go to a doctor.

But just setting there listening to that easy-riding music coming in at the old screen door and watching the shine boy through the big plate glass, I held my mashed hand in my shirt and told Jinks to go ahead and cut my hair. . . . I'd run to the doctor just as quick as it was trimmed.

I marched out like a wounded soldier back from the front lines, with a fresh hair cut, some red loud-smelling tonic squirted on me for good measure—and I stopped at the old bench and just stood there listening to the music.

When the Negro boy looked up, I said, "That sounds awful good to me. . . . Guess the reason is 'cause I got to go to the doctor."

"Shucks, you ain't so bad off," he said. "I been to the doctor three or four times. Been to him about everything. . . . You'll be all right."

"What's the name of that piece you're blowing on there?" I asked him. I could see his mouth harp was almost as old as he was; it had fell apart and been wired back on both ends.

"That's called Raincrow," he told me. And then he sucked the low notes down, choking the tone in the palms of his hands, and played it again.

"Raincrow? What's a Raincrow?" I asked.

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"Don't you know what a Raincrow is? That's a big bird that gets out in the timber and hollers when it's going to rain. Then he hollers while it's raining. Then he hollers after it quits."

I shook my head up and down and said, "Boy, them birds just about holler all of the time, don't they?"

"That's the way Raincrow does. Three different ways of hollering. One like this, when it's just clouding up, looking like wet weather—" And he cupped his hands over the mouth organ and strained the lower bass notes in, just such a way that the soft sound that come out had a faraway sad call, reminding me of the turtle doves that cooed on the hillsides; but there was a little difference, and of course I knew that was the Raincrow waiting for it to rain.

"And when it commences to rain, that's when Raincrow hollers something like this—" And he blew again, and I could feel the chilly wind in the underbrush and feel the water soaking through my clothes.

When he had blown the last call, I could tell, without stretching the almanac, that the weather had cleared up, everybody's clothes would dry out, the leaves in the forest would smell sweet and clean.

"That's how Raincrow sounds," he said. "That's the only way Raincrow knows how to holler. I heard him holler down in Louisiana. But you ain't got no Raincrow up here in Oklahoma. I'm just telling you how Raincrow goes, so you'll know a little bit about Louisiana."

In the months that followed, there were a few breaks in my school attendance. Days I didn't even show up for books. But I knew exactly where I was all the time. I even knew why. But when my dad and the teacher asked me about the days my desk was vacant, I didn't know what to say.

I saved nickels, dimes, sold bottles, toe

sacks, missed a lunch or two, and bought me a harmonica. It was pretty well worn out when my folks really found I was learning to play the Raincrow so I'd know about Louisiana. I can still see a picture of the sunny afternoons when I would set out on the heavy platform back of the Creek Trading Company, a grocery store next door to Jinks' barber shop, and play alongside George, the shine boy. I remember his blowing the Fox and the Hounds, calling up all of the long-eared hounds, getting ready for a big fast-running coon hunt. George even had all of them named, and you could hear them one by one, answering the call of the hunting horn: old Coaley—he's coal black; Blue—he bays the loudest at a 'possum but the longest at a coon; then Shep, barks a lot but ain't no good for nothin'; Trixie, she dives right in; and there's old Dollar falling in—he gets on a hot scent and he squalls and he bawls; and it's here they go, down and gone—'cross the creek with a spike collar on—

It was a pretty empty-looking town when George lost his job at the shop. But I played his songs, and they made me walk slow and think about things. His family moved away somewhere and I never run across him again.

I got to be a Freshman in high school, even took up typing, and many a day I'd set in front of the typewriter and wish I had something to write about. My harmonica would be in my shirt pocket, and I knew I couldn't play it in class; so I'd just sort of sneak it out real easy, cup it in my hands, and look out across the willow grove at the bottom of the hill.

When they threw the oil field open, lots of jobs sprung up with good wages; and the pool halls, road houses, and hotel lobbies filled up with hard-working men and women of all colors—pushing and shoving, wheeling and dealing, trying to

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make a living. Traveling musicians hit town, made the rounds, and rambled on down the road. As fast as they'd light on the streets, I'd locate them and park myself on a car fender close by and listen to them play.

Ear Players, folks called them, because they picked up their music and singing without reading the notes, and learnt more and more songs everywhere they went: fiddlers that made their violins out of old oil cans, trick bow fiddlers, blues and religious players that begged for nickels up and down the street. Preachers talked on hell fire and damnation and played music for their tips. Blind and crippled people rattled old tin cups. War veterans played mouth organs through shrapnel holes in their throats. Negroes blew the railroad blues with their nose. Indians chanted up and down the curb. Ballad singers of all kinds and colors hit the oil towns . . . and there was very little of their kind of singing that I didn't soak up.

Oklahoma dirt-farmers, on Saturdays, jammed the streets, talking high prices, low prices, politics, and religion. They only kept quiet when there was a good musician going. They gathered around in big herds, chewing tobacco, sharpening long keen pocket knives, rolling the makings, and listening. The population of that county run about one-third Negro, one-third Indian, and one-third white. I saw how the music of one color was also the music of the other.

There was a tall slim driller that lived with his new wife in a box-board house at the bottom of the schoolhouse hill, paying \$5 to \$7 a week for a place that didn't cost \$100. Our bunch of kids had built us a gang hut on the south side of the hill, and one day, while passing his little house, we heard the booming of a big guitar and a song about the fastest race horse that ever run.

Stewbally.

We went inside and sat around on the floor. He loved to sing for us. On his days off we kept him busy from he could till he couldn't:

*Stewbally was a good horse, he held a
high head;
And the mane on his foretop was fine as
silk thread;
I rode him in England, I rode him in
Spain;
I never did lose, boys, I always did gain.*

Hard luck hit our family and it scattered apart.

At 14, I first hit the road and followed it down to the Gulf coast. The country was booming with real-estate deals, and a family of my friends had moved in down there to get started on a truck farm.

On the road I found I was a stranger everywhere and to everybody. Because you're just a kid, only 14, people ask you, Ain't you afraid of this? Ain't you afraid of that? Wouldn't I like a job to earn my room and board?

I remember a tall gangling guy that run a little gossiping barber shop in a little town. I felt like I was more at home with barbers than anybody, because I'd learned to listen to their haywire jokes and knew when to laugh. But I'd learned awful quick, too, just the right minute to pull out my harmonica and start blowing the blues—and with this particular barber it worked pretty good.

He handed me a dime. I played the chorus of an old Pentecost song: "I got a home in that rock, can't you see?" and he sung the words. Two other barbers, hearing the music, come a-running out of a door in the rear of the shop, cheap whiskey strong on their breath, and crowded around the barber and me. The whole bunch hit their parts and reeled from side to side singing:

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I got a home in that rock, can't you see;
I got a home in that rock, can't you see;
I got a home in that rock, just beyond
the mountain top;
And it's that Old Rock of Ages, can't
you see?

God gave Noahy the rainbow sign, can't
you see;

God gave Noahy the rainbow sign, can't
you see;

God gave Noahy the rainbow sign;

Won't be water but fire next time;

It's that Old Rock of Ages, can't you see?

And there in the sweat of that hot summer's day, I learned that nickels and dimes could be made by finding people that are hungry for their own kind of music, and making a swap.

It was easy for me to catch rides. One truck driver told me, "I pick up free riders by their weight; if they weigh more'n I do, they walk." When I caught him looking the other way, I sneaked my mouth organ out of my shirt pocket and laid my head back on the seat and tried to make my music heard above the roar of the motor. For a long time I lost out. Then, "Mule Skinner Blues?" he hollered at me.

"Yes, sir—" I said. "Something like that. . . I just learnt it the other day . . . practicin' up on it a little. . . ." I was stalling just a shade because there's thousands of blues sung to the same tune.

"That ain't my favorite blues, though," he yelled above the noises of the truck. "I like that there Black Snake Moan—that's my picks."

I didn't say anything because I'd never heard tell of the Black Snake Moan. I felt like I'd lost a hand at poker, and leaned my head back again, watching the fence posts whiz past, and by force of habit, without really paying much attention, I kept on blowing the same old blues tune

over and over. And he rocked his head and sang in his nose:

*Hey, hey, Woman, got a black snake
crawling in my room;*

*Hey, hey, Woman, got a black snake
crawling in my room;*

*Better bring your daddy a broomstick,
Mama,*

*Help me get rid of this black snake
soon! . . .*

And when he shot on his brakes and I got out the door, he said, "Look, kid—I don't know where you're goin', see, but you look too damn young to be out hittin' the skids. But I guess you know your own business. Here. . . ." And he dropped a heavy silver dollar into the palm of my hand. "This old road, kid, she's rougher'n a cob," he said, and wheeled down a side road full of chug holes.

The family of friends couldn't believe their eyes when I walked up on their front porch. I'd mailed them a letter I was on my way. Mrs. Mosely opened the door and her eyes run out on long stems. She hollered, "Why, Woody, you crazy little rascal! Get in this house! Bud! Pete! Here's Woody! It's really him! He wasn't kidding! He really did come, all the way from Okemah to Algoa. You're just crazy in the head, you little idiot, but you're gonna stay right here and live with us! You ain't gonna get out on that road and traipse around like a wild man!"

Bud and Pete sounded good to me. I was born and raised up with them. There are photos of all three of us in our diapers standing on top of the Mosely cellar, years ago, back in Okemah.

Bud could chord on a banjo and Pete carried a rusty Jew's harp. So, before very long, our talking settled down to a few words between a lot of old songs we'd always known.

"Can you hoe figs?" Mrs. Mosely asked.

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"I can hoe anything that can be hoed," I told her. She'd been more of my mother than any other woman I could remember, when my own family busted up.

"Fine. You'll make a good hand. Won't make much more than your mush and coffee; but you can live right here with us. I'm just not gonna even think about seein' you walk out down that road again, young squirt. Road's no place for a boy like you. . . ."

Bud cut in and said, "Say, tell you what. We got to make music for an ice cream freezin' tonight over at Schultz's farm. We'll all go over as a band, huh—what say?"

After a big supper of crackling corn bread and peppery pinto beans, cooked with a hunk of sow belly, we took off—Bud, Pete, and myself all washed and cleaned up, sporting one of Bud's shirts; cutting across back lots and fields, over a barbed-wire fence, and down the cool dirt road that took us to the Schultzes.

Everybody was in friendly spirits when we walked into the party.

"This guy's name's Woody. Just blowed in from my old home town in Oklahoma—kind of a foreigner but a good guy at heart—and, besides, he pays his way—plays music—mouth organ," Bud said when he put me in touch with the youngest of the Schultzes. She was friendly and as full of pep as one little girl could be. I felt like I had lived right in that neighborhood for twenty years.

"What's your name again?" I asked. "I guess I forgot it. . . ."

"Dorothy," she said. "That's all—just plain old Dorothy. You can remember that, can't you?" It had been a long time since I'd seen a face this friendly. It made a man want to get to thinking about settling down.

Bud got his banjo tuned up, I blew a note on the harmonica, and Bud nodded his head. "Okay. She's tuned up."

Pete never was a singer, but he was the loudest lung in the house, so you heard him above everybody and everything else on the Gulf that night: "Name of this here little piece, folks, is 'Short-enin' Bread'":

*Four little sisters form a ring,
Now they break, and now they swing.
Boys join hands in the middle of the floor,
Hug them gals, and on you go!*

*Birdie in the cage, and that won't do;
Cage broke down and the bird flew
through;
Join hands and circle to the right,
Grab your partner and swing all night! . . .*

*Circle four, and on you go;
Chicken in the bread-pan peckin' out
dough;
Do Se Do, in the middle of the floor;
May be the last time, I don't know!*

*Girls you wait, and the boys get straight,
Swing your partner like swinging on a gate;
Meet your love with a big hand-shake;
All go east on a west-bound freight!*

My head was in a condition I won't try to describe. I wanted to stay out on the Schultz farm—I wanted to live this kind of a life all my life. To know some people real well, to know what they wanted and what they done to make a living—a million things about them. When we got a fifteen-minute rest period, I found myself walking down a path that led to the cow lot, and Dorothy was listening to me. When we come to the rail fence, instead of climbing through, we clumb up on the top rail and looked out across the sleeping cows at a great shiny Texas full moon.

There is a smell, a better smell than I can write about, in heavy wavy hair—at just about this time of any night—that is, if you're situated as I was by the side of a smart young healthy girl on a

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rail fence, or anywhere similar, with the wind whipping in somewhere off the salty Gulf waters—so that the fine, clean whiff of homemade dresses mixes just right with the unperfumed waves of a pretty girl's hair. . . .

I suggested we get down off the fence, inasmuch as it wasn't a suitable location for playing and singing—to which Dorothy agreed. So we found, down a little path, the flat top of a planter, where we sat while I played the harmonica and she sang—just sort of mumbling and quiet-like, but a kind of singing that convinced me the only people in this world that know how to rest are the folks that do the hardest work.

To sample her feelings I said, "Well, the morning's a new day. Wonder where I'll be by that time. . . ."

She outsmarted me a little by just saying, cool and calm-like, "Well, I hope you find some good way of making friends everywhere you go."

"Yeah," I gulped. "But—everybody ain't as friendly as you Schultzes. How'm I gonna find some way to make friends with everybody everywhere I go?"

"Oh, I don't know. That'll be mainly up to you," she told me. "Just something like tonight, I guess—maybe by playing music—you can't ever tell. I've got a sneaking feeling you're going to just ramble and ramble and keep rambling—and you won't have time to make friends in a slow way, like most folks do; you'll have to find out some kind of a fast way—like tonight—music and singing."

Dorothy was a dozen times smarter than I was that night. . . .

I got a few little jobs—helping a water-well driller, hoeing figs, irrigating strawberries in the sandy land, laying roofs, hustling sign jobs with a painter—and then found myself headed back north from the Gulf coast country again.

I followed the new oil towns and found myself as far west as Hobbs, New Mexico. I'd learned how to play a guitar, a few of the easy chords, and was making saloons like a preacher changing from street corner to street corner. I slept in jails when my kitty didn't do so good, and in cheap hotels whenever I had money. I made everything and nothing: from one cent to fifty-four dollars one single night.

I hit Pampa in the Panhandle of Texas, and stuck there a while. Then the dust storms begun blowing blacker and meaner, and the rain was getting less, and the dust more and more. I made up a little song that went:

*'37 was a dusty year,
And I says, Woman, I'm a leavin' here.*

And on one dark and dusty day, I pulled out down the road that led to California, vigilantes, citizens groups, deputy thugs, and mean harness bulls.

The hot days on the highway made you sweat, and you could lay down on the desert at the side of the road and take a little snooze; but the only place, outside of saloons, where you could get in out of the weather at night was the filling stations. And in pretty near every one you saw a big sign jumping out in your face: "Don't Loaf Here, Hitch-Hiker." And the boss or station-hand would say, "Sorry, bud, have to ask you to move on. . . . If we let one guy hang out around here, we'd have to do the same thing for all of them—and God knows there's a flat million of you coming from somewhere." So I'd hit the wind again.

There was warmer-hearted ones, though—in some of the smaller stations the big companies didn't own yet. One was a salvage yard with a little dim light batting like a butterfly's wings, a home-made air-pressure motor whanging away, and a

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skinny man that didn't seem to care if you come, went, or stayed. I ducked in at the door and sidled up to the heater. He waited about five minutes, then asked me, "Play that music box, son?"

I told him yes, when my hands was thawed out to where I could wiggle my fingers.

"'Bouts ye from?" He kept looking out the window for some unexpected customer to come along and help him pay his bills.

"Oklahoma."

"Part?"

"Eastern," I told him.

"Town?"

"Okemah—Okfuskee County." I wondered if he'd know what I was talking about. Oklahoma is full of Indian names. Hard to pronounce.

"Creek Indian Nation."

"That's right—big oil country," I said, surprised.

"You mean it used to be. Hell, they shut that field down ten years ago—pumpin' now—that's all, an' pumpin' don't take no work hands. One big field engine and a string of cables running around'll pump a whole half a county, an' just one or two men to keep the engine runnin' an' the cables greased. I know that oil-field work from start to finish. . . . Go ahead, knock off a tune on that box."

"Which tune?" I said.

"They's an old song that goes somethin' like this. Never did know but one line of it—" And he coughed, snorted, heaved his lungs and throat clear, and sung in a high, rattly voice.

Outttt on an Injun reser-vation;

Far awayyyy from civi-li-zation—

Wherrrrrr—wherrrrr—

Wherrrr the foot of a white man sel-dommmmm trod;

He looked up at me, then into the fire, and run through his mind for the next

lines, but he couldn't catch them; so I sung 'em out:

*White man went to fish one summer;
There lived an Indian girl, a hummer,
Satin skin, like copper and bronze.*

We glanced in the corners of each other's eyes, smiling like we'd won a dollar watch at a picture-show raffle. He asked if I was hungry. I said I wasn't hungry, I was just vacant. He chuckled to his self, got up, opened his greasy candy case, and handed me a long, nickel bar. I downed it in a couple or three sticky bites. I was setting on an old packing box and started dozing, falling over to one side, waking up, and then dozing and falling again. Then he said, "Listen, sonny, I cain't set here and keep a eye peeled on you to keep you from falling into that fire. If you want to sleep, they's an old truck out here on the back side of the lot. Go out there and bed down. Use this to throw over you. . . ." And he handed me an old strip of waterproof canvas.

I held it up to the heater to warm it just a little. And he told me about a girl that had hitched in early in the night. "Overalls and jumper on. Right purty little thing. Don't know where she's from er whereabouts she's headed. Somethin' haywired back home, if you was to ask me. See loads of 'em on the roads—specially Mexican girls. They take short jumps from crop to crop. Some jump clean into California—and some's so bashful they won't even ask a feller for a ride—just walk from one crop to the next one. All ages. The one out in the truck must be right around about seventeen year old."

I cut in on him. "Ahhh—the one—where?"

"Truck. . . . Not more'n seventeen. But then you cain't tell. Told her she might have a partner in the truck tonight—cold

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night—lots of walkers on the roads. She said it was Okie dokie with her. Mighty friendly. . . .” He let his eyes go shut for a few seconds, and I was standing there wondering about life in general.

“Reck—reckon it’ll be all right—both sleep in the same truck?” I managed to ask.

“Shore it’ll be all right. Go ahead on out there an’ bed down. She’s all right. You’ll just go to bed in the back of the truck; and she’s up in the cab with both doors locked. . . .” He dozed again as I opened the door. I felt the dry cutting wind while I clumb up into the bed of the truck and pulled the hunk of canvas over me. I lay there thinking a million and one thoughts, and my eyes wouldn’t go to sleep. First thing I knew, though, it was broad daylight, with the sun just sticking its head up over the flat, squared patches of clean-smelling truck stuff. I thanked the old man, handed him his canvas, and walked down the road, trotting a little to get my blood to percolating.

In a patch of sunshine, parked on the rail of a cement bridge, I saw a girl dressed up in overalls, hair tied back with a bandana. I was within ten feet of her when she said, “Good morning.” I was out of breath for two reasons, but I said, “Pretty mornin’, ain’t it?” Then she asked me, “Where you bound for?” “To the end of this 66,” I told her, “and I don’t know where that is. . . .”

She was prettier than most of the tourists. No paint. Looked like she had good sense, too. I didn’t know whether to keep walking or stop for a visit. Then she said, “Sing me a song.” “Which one?” I asked her. “Ohhh, just your favorite. I laid awake four hours last night hoping you’d sing me a song in that old truck.” A fast-stepping sedan whiffed past us, but all we got was a cold puff of early morning wind.

“I was asleep; cain’t play when you’re asleep—” I told her.

“You’re lying, and you know it. You were not asleep!”

“What makes you think I wasn’t?”

“Well, two reasons. First place, there’s not a man or woman living that can sleep in weather like this in a truck like that,” she said, pulling out a half a pack of cigarettes, handing me one, and holding up a match for me to light up.

“You said two reasons. What’s the other?”

“Me.”

“You?”

“Yes, me. . . .”

“Me, what?”

“I was the second reason.”

Well, there wasn’t much I could add onto that. I leaned up against the big square concrete bridge post and puffed away at the smoke.

“Are you going to play me a song?”

I flipped the snipe over the railing of the bridge, pulled my old guitar around in place and started:

*Come set down beside me, my darlin’;
Come lay your cool hand on my brow;
Promise me that you will never—
Be nobody’s darlin’ but mine.*

You’re as sweet as the flowers in spring-time;

*You’re as pure as the dew from the rose;
Yes, I’d rather be somebody’s darlin’
Than a poor boy that nobody knows.*

She sung all of the verses with me. Early morning music is just about the prettiest kind of music there is, but lots of folks lay in bed so long they never get to hear any of it. I decided, standing there, that women too are just about their prettiest in the early morning sun.

“Where ’bouts you from and where you headin’?” I finally asked her. She twisted her cigarette out against the rail and said back to me, “I didn’t ask you where you was from, did I?”

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I thought a minute and said, "Don't believe you did. . . . You asked me where I was headed but not where I was from."

"Well, what do you say, brother, that we just sort of let things rest just that way?" She looked me real straight in the eye. "Okay with you?"

"Okay with me," I said.

"Then let's sing some more. You know the 'Last Letter'?" She started it:

*My dear, as I write you this letter, I think
of the past; . . .*

A fast-looking car threw on its brakes. A car-load of people, miners from up around Wickenburg or Globe, to all looks. I saw the passengers making room for more and thought how pleasant this part of my trip was going to be, playing and singing with the nice girl.

A heavy-set lady poked her head out the window and hollered, "Sorry we ain't got room for the two of you. But we hated to pass you up; you look all right to us! I don't blame you if you don't wanta split up. But if one of you wants to ride with us to Globe, hop in!"

"Hey, you—" I looked around at the girl—"get in this buggy here, and you're Globe bound! I'll wait and snag another lift."

"Don't be a nit-wit," she said in my ear. "You take this ride. You know how easy it is for me to get one! Go on! Pile in there, goof!" She was shoving me toward the door. So I fell into a place in the car by the window. She was standing there pretty as a picture, and she said, "Thanks—for the songs—"

"Shucks," I told her. "Don't thank me. I'd pile out of this car and stand right there by the side of the road and just sing the rest of my life—if—you—"

"Ever'body in? All aboard! Grab a toe holt!" The driver laughed and yelled as he took off in a big jump, running her up to 40 in second, boosting her into high,

and kicking the speedometer right on up to 65, 70, 75. . . .

"Sing us a song, pardner!" somebody shouted.

"Yeah, some good old working-folks' music! Whip 'er down!" another one yelled in my ear. So I set in with:

*I was standin' down in an Arizona town
one day!*

*I was standin' down in an Arizona town
one day!*

*Lord, standin' down in an Arizona town
one day!*

*And there wasn't a woman in town that
knew my name!*

One thin dime was all that I had!

One thin dime was all that I had!

One thin dime was all that I had!

*That's broke enough to make a minin'
man feel bad!*

*Every good man gets a little hard luck
some time!*

*Hey, hey, every good man gets a little
hard luck some time!*

Two or three harped in with "You're tellin' me!" "Tell the truth, boy! Tell the truth!" "And the closter to Globe you git, the harder your luck!"

*Every good man gets a little hard luck
some time;*

*Gets down and out, and he ain't got a
dime!*

"That's me!" "That's my kind of music!" "I can see you're gonna eat your belly full on this trip, brother!"

I kept throwing verses on the fire:

*I'm goin' to Arizona where the waters
taste like wine!*

*I'm goin' to Arizona where the waters
taste like wine!*

"Hey! Hey!"

*I'm goin' to Arizona where the waters
taste like wine!*

COMMON GROUND

'Cause them East Texas waters taste like
picklin' brine!"

The small-sized lady in the front seat looked around at me and said, "You could stop off at Globe with your singing and make yourself a good piece of money. We get tired of this old sissy stuff you hear on the nickel machines!"

"Nawww, guess I'll head on for California," I told her.

"Tough country, that California, boy!"

"It ain't the country that's tough—it's them big vigilanty cops they grow out there—them native sons they call 'em!"

The hardest part of the trip was between Globe and Kingman. The further west you walk, the browner, hotter, stiller, and emptier the country gets.

There I met the hard-rock miners, old prospectors, desert rats, and whole swarms of hitch-hikers, migratory workers—squatting with their little piles of belongings in the shade of the big sign boards, out across the flat, hard-crust, gravelly desert. Kids chasing around in the blistering sun. Ladies cooking scrappy meals in sooty buckets, scouring the plates clean with sand. All waiting for some kind of a chance to get across.

I set around with everybody and sung our old songs from the dust country:

Well, I'm goin' down this road, feelin'
bad;

Yes, I'm goin' down this road, feelin'
bad;

I said, I'm goin' down this road feelin'
bad;

Lord God, and I ain'ta gonna be treated
this a way!

"Sing some more," they'd say. . . .

Well, my children need three square meals
a day!

Yes, my children need three square meals
a day!

My children need three square meals a
day, Lord, God,
And I ain'ta gonna be treated this a way!

The young folks in work pants, khaki and whipcord, slacks and cotton dresses, would gather around us and sing too. But sometimes they'd stand real quiet and listen. I knew what they was thinking about: California and the new country and the work. Born to work hard. Living without working was a pain and a torment. And to be idle was a question they couldn't answer. To be stranded out in the red-hot desert watching the slick machines, the fur coats and poodle dogs whizzing past, seeing the bottles drained of bonded whiskey thrown out along the road—pretty cars, pretty people cruising along in them—that was a question they talked about.

What kind of work, how much work—to get a car and a coat and a poodle dog like that?

We'd sing a little more:

Takes a ten-dollar shoe to fit my feet!
Takes a ten-dollar shoe to fit my feet!
Takes a ten-dollar shoe to fit my feet,
Lord, God!

And I ain'ta gonna be treated this a way!

'Cause your two-dollar shoes hurt my feet;
Yes, your two-dollar shoes hurt my feet;
Your two-dollar shoes hurt my feet, Lord,
God!

And I ain'ta gonna be treated this a way!

A tiny old lady that looked like everybody's mama rushed out from a little jungly camp and said, "Here's a bite of lunch I put up for you. You'll need something to stick to your ribs before you make it across from here to Barstow. . . ." She handed me a greasy paper sack. I knew what was in it: some cold biscuits with salt pork between them.

I thanked her and she asked me,

EAR PLAYERS

"How're you going to make it across, son?"

"How far is it from here to Needles?"

"Hottest part of the whole trip, boy. It's all day's hard driving in a good running car. How're you going to make it over the line? You ain't going to try to sneak across, are you? Those cops are tougher than shoe leather. . . ."

"Yeah. Heard about 'em. But—you know—we can't all stay here and live like grasshoppers on this desert," I told her. "I don't know. Don't know what I'll do, or how I'll get across. . . . Just sort of a gamble, you might say. . . ."

"You gamble, son?" Her worried eyes was asking me all kinds of questions.

"Nawww, I don't mean that kind of gamblin'—I mean gamblin' about the officers at the state line. Just gamblin' I'll run onto one that likes singin' and music. . . ."

"Well, sonny boy, I hope that you, I mean I hope that we all of us win. . . ."

I found the deputy that liked his singing and music, all right, and there's not a county in the whole state of California I've not played my guitar and sung my songs in. I gambled on officers that liked singing and cops that like people and people that like work and workers that like singing. And I've never lost a hand.

Work is the thing. The biggest and best thing you can sing about is work—songs where the very time itself is set to the rhythm of a fast whistling train, or a steamboat lost in the fog, or an air-hammer sucking wind, a horse loping home, the rattle and banging of a red-hot steel mill, or the quiet booming and chugging of a new oil field as you look out across the country.

Work is the main thing. Just learn where the work is: that's where you'll find real honest American music and songs being made up.

There's the love songs, too. But loving or being loved is a first-class job of high-class work.

You hear lots of resting songs, but you only rest so you can do your work better. You sing of things you haven't got, so you can get the things you need. You sing of the things that are wrong, so you can help to fix them.

A new worker has jumped up in the last few years—to stand alongside Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Driller Drake, Pecos Bill, and all of the world's greatest workers—Jackhammer John:

I'm Jackhammer John, I'm a Jackhammer man;

*Born with a Jackhammer in my hand!
Lord, God, I got them Jackhammer Blues!*

I'm a Jackhammer Man from a Jackhammer town;

I built every port from the North Pole down; . . .

Hammered in the rain, hammered in the dust;

Hammered in the best and I hammered in the worst; . . .

Hammered in the mill, hammered in the mines;

Been in jail about a thousand times; . . .

Got a Jackhammer Woman, just as sweet as pie;

I'm gonna hammer on the hammer till the day I die!

This kind of singing and hard traveling is my whole life, and I could write this magazine plumb full of it.

Since hitch-hiking to New York City, Christmas 1940, Woody Guthrie has appeared frequently on CBS radio programs, made several albums of Victor Records, and toured the country with the Almanac Singers.

STONE

MARI TOMASI

MARIA DALLI shivered in the cold wind. Her full lips tightened grimly as she studied the stonecutters gathered about the open grave of Italo Tosti. Her husband's ruddy cheeks were sunk in sorrow. He could not conceal his pain, her Pietro. He and Italo had grown up together in the old country. But it was Pietro who had come first to this Vermont granite town. It was he who had written glowing letters telling of the splendid wages in the stonesheds, who had said, "Come over to this fine country, Italo. Marry your Lucia and cross the ocean."

The black cassock flapped at the ankles of young, red-headed Father Carty. "Requiescat in pace," he intoned to the wind. He turned from the coffin, touching his hand to Lucia Tosti's in futile comfort.

So. Another *paesan'* stonecutter laid away. Maria breathed deeply. "Come Lucia," she ordered gently.

The widow had stopped her sobs. She was rigid now, staring at the coffin, heedless of Maria's words.

Pietro blinked his eyes and tugged at his silky mustache. "You go now, eh, Lucia?" he begged. "We will stay—the six of us—to see that everything is all right." He hesitated. Then, "Yes?" he inquired of the other five bearers.

They nodded—Gerbati the shed boss, Uey Olsen the polisher, Jose Santioz the smithy, Vitleau the sawyer, and the sad-faced Ronato, most skilled of the carvers in Granitown.

Fumbling awkwardly with his cap, Gerbati spoke. "You need not worry about a memorial, Lucia Tosti. I will give the stone, free. And Pietro and Ronato, they have agreed to carve it in their spare time." He shifted his great weight clumsily.

"You are generous, Gerbati," Lucia said.

But as Maria led her away, she spat bitterly. "Stone! Stone! The dead wear granite memorials at their heads. Dead stonecutters like my Italo wear granite in their lungs. Stonedust!" Her voice was low, tense. "Only eight years he cut stone. Only eight years to catch the sickness." Her fingers dug into Maria's arm. "You are a fool, Maria, to let Pietro stay in the sheds. Make him quit now—before you find yourself a widow with five little ones. Like me. . . . What shall I do now? I will not take charity! Shall I then turn *strega*, like Granitown's Josie Blaine? Shall I throw open the doors of my home to anyone who wishes to buy a glass of wine?"

"Hush," Maria murmured.

Tonight she would try again. Tonight, after having seen his closest *paesan'* laid in the ground from the sickness, perhaps Pietro would listen.

Maria and Pietro closed Lucia's door behind them at midnight. They knew she would sleep, fatigue and grief had so obviously conquered her flesh. Under the wavering light of the one street lamp they