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Tracking Down A Legend: Guy B. Johnson's "Lost" Cylinder Recordings

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In the 1920s, folklore studies at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill were led by sociologists under the auspices of the Institute for Research in Social Science. Guy B. Johnson matriculated there in 1924 and was given the position of research assistant to Howard Odum. During this period, they collaborated on two works: *The Negro and his Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926). These were followed by Johnson's *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* (1929), and combined, they made a significant contribution to the study of Afro-American musical traditions.

It has long been thought that field recordings collected during the course of this research had been either lost or destroyed. Odum may have recorded in Mississippi as early as 1904 (Oliver 1984:8) and *Blues and Gospel Records 1902-1942* lists recordings made "at or around Chapel Hill and Durham, North Carolina, and Hampton, Virginia, in the spring or summer of 1925 . . . by Milton Metfessel with the aid of Howard Odum" (Godrich 1969:738-39). These were used for Metfessel's research on the "phonophotographic" notation of Afro-American songs (Metfessel 1928) and none have been recovered. In fact, it is not certain if Godrich indexed the actual cylinder recordings or simply the phonophotographic representations of the performances.

In 1983, cylinder project assistants at the Archives of Traditional Music discovered the companion cylinders recorded by Johnson (accession number 83-911-F). Although they had been in the vault for approximately thirty years, the cylinders had been mislabeled and the collector listed as a Charles Johnson, thereby obscuring their significance. With the exception of Natalie Curtis Burlin's 1917 Hampton Institute cylinders (accession number 54-145-F), Johnson's cylinders may be the earliest extant field recordings of Afro-American music.

Dr. Johnson, who still resides in Chapel Hill, remembers experimenting with a cylinder machine, but

believes he was never able to obtain recordings of good sound quality. The eight cylinders at the Archives confirm his assessment. After further deterioration caused by cracks and mold, the resulting sound quality ranges from fair to inaudible. In order to analyze the cylinders, filtering was used to remove as much cylinder noise as possible from a new cassette copy. Everything below 100 Hz and above 8 kHz was rolled off by 12 dB and notch filtering removed the remaining pops and clicks. Nevertheless, the study of early field recorded cylinders is not for the timid or those with sensitive ears, since it is often necessary to turn up the volume as far as possible to hear the music beneath the noise.

Twenty songs are contained on the cylinders, which are of the large six-inch Dictaphone variety and hold as many as five songs per cylinder. Most are spirituals and all are unaccompanied. Slips of paper inserted into the original cylinder boxes list the contents quite accurately and usually include the performers' names. This information can be supplemented by Johnson's publications, which often provide brief biographical notes on the performers and indicate the specific locations of the recordings. Most box notes are marked "Chapel Hill 1928," but due to the correlations between the Johnson and Odum collections, it seems likely that some may have been recorded as early as 1925. It is also likely that the locations included not only Chapel Hill, but nearby Durham, as well as Hampton, Virginia, and St. Helena Island, South Carolina, since the performers cited were from those areas.

Unfortunately, two of the cylinders (0637, 0633) have deteriorated to the extent that only fragments of the spirituals "Go Down Moses" and "Reign Master Jesus" remain. The other spirituals listed—"I'm Gonna Die With the Staff in my Hand," and "Wasn't That a Mighty Day When Jesus Christ Was Born"—are inaudible, as is the song "Much Obligated to You." In addition, of the five children's songs recorded on cylinder 0639, only fragments of "Loop de Loo," "A Tisket a Tasket," and another melody I could not immediately identify are audible (box notes did not indicate titles for these selections). The song identified as "Wheel in a Wheel" on the same cylinder, also performed by children, possibly matches the text of "Wheel in Middle of Wheel" (Johnson and Odum, 1925:81). Two early blues songs, "Trouble in

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My Home," performed by an unidentified female vocalist, and "Texas Blues," performed by Robert Mason of Durham, North Carolina, (see his rendition of "John Henry" in Johnson, 1928:125-26) have also deteriorated beyond recognition.

There are a number of spirituals, however, that are of fair sound quality. Several are representative of the folk jubilee style and are performed by an unidentified male gospel quartet, presumably at the Hampton Institute. Johnson identifies "Trouble Over I Believe," "My Lord's Getting' Us Ready," and "Somebody Rappin' at My Door" as shout songs since their verses feature responsorials followed by spirited shouts. The same quartet also performs a popular song in close harmony titled "My Lima Bean," and penciled notes indicate that a variant existed as "My Gasoline."

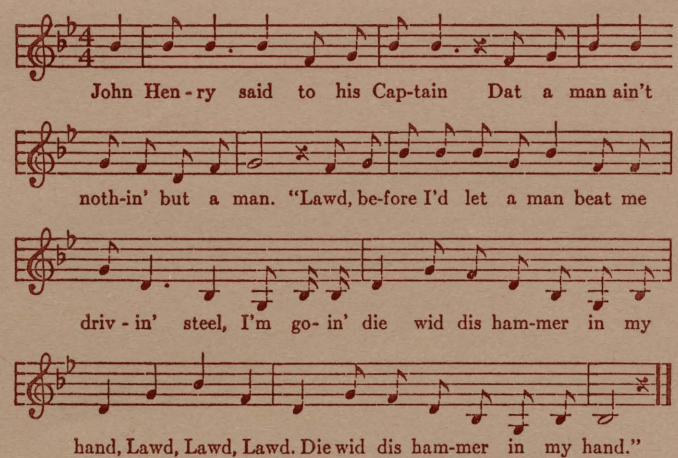
A performer listed simply as Watson from the Hampton Institute sings a few fragments of the bass line from the refrain of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" on cylinder 0638. This corresponds to two of Odum's phonophotographic recordings from 1925, since he also recorded a bass singer from Hampton in "All My Days" and "Let the Heaven Light Shine." This may indicate that Johnson recorded at the same time, or, if Odum also recorded onto cylinders, that the two collections became intermingled at some time before a portion was deposited at the Archives. This is supported further by the rendition of "Let the Heaven Light Shine" in the Johnson collection that matches almost exactly the fragment printed in Metfessel (1928:65-66). The Archives has no information concerning the provenance of the Johnson collection, and Johnson, who was quite surprised to learn of its existence, could not provide any further clues on the matter.

The most interesting rendition of a spiritual is "You Better Run to the City of Refuge," possibly recorded at St. Helena Island. Although the sound quality is quite poor, one can clearly hear the distinct performance practice of the quartet. It begins in typical gospel quartet style with the entrance of the lead vocalist followed a measure later by the chorus, but before the last refrain, the lead takes up a solo which is freely improvised, melismatic, and extremely rhythmic, with emphasis on the spoken shout rather than the melodic line. Verses seem to be added at liberty in a sermonic fashion, and do not follow the original text of the spiritual. Finally, the chorus enters with the refrain, signaling a return to the initial melody. This description of the spiritual is very similar to that given by Zora Neale Hurston, who recalled how her Baptist father would suddenly stop preaching, walk to the edge of the pulpit, and break into a whispering song. The most effective of these was "Run to the City of Refuge," which often moved the congregation to "come through shouting" (Oliver 1984:144). Perhaps someday it will be possible to restore this particular cylinder through digital technology. It would be of much interest to researchers of early gospel music.

Four different versions of the ballad "John Henry" are interspersed throughout the collection. These were recorded by Johnson before the commercial versions released on race records exerted an influence on oral tradition (Johnson 1928:88). Two of the versions were

recorded at Chapel Hill, one possibly performed by Robert Mason and the other by Odell Walker. According to Johnson, Walker lived in a work camp barracks across from the university in Chapel Hill and was part of a construction crew. During Johnson's frequent visits to Odum's house, the two men would sit on the front porch and listen to the work songs. One day they heard Walker singing nearby and invited him over; from that day on a friendship was forged. Walker became a frequent visitor, and after loosening up with a few drinks, sang his repertoire of work songs and ballads for the two researchers. Undoubtedly, many of the texts used in *Negro Workaday Songs* were provided by Walker, although informants' names are never listed in that publication. Mason was apparently Walker's friend and singing partner and both of the performers contributed versions of "John Henry" for Johnson's publication (Mason on pp. 125-26 and Walker on pp. 99-100). Neither version is audible on the cylinders.

The final two versions of "John Henry," recorded on St. Helena Island, are the best recordings in the collection. According to Johnson, he brought four men together to sing spirituals [possibly those represented on cylinders 0635-0636] and found that two could sing "John Henry." The singers had some discussion as to how "John Henry" ought to be sung, and finally decided that each should sing it as he pleased. The first was sung by Thomas Watkins, the second by Richard Sheadrack (Johnson 1928:121). Both of these versions are represented on cylinder 0641 and follow the printed texts precisely (Johnson 1928:122-23), except that Sheadrack's cylinder version begins with verse 2 of the printed text followed by verses 1, 3, and 4. The following is the version of John Henry as sung by Watkins:



John Hen-ry said to his Cap-tain Dat a man ain't
noth-in' but a man. "Lawd, be-fore I'd let a man beat me
driv-in' steel, I'm go-in' die wid dis ham-mer in my
hand, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd. Die wid dis ham-mer in my hand."

1. John Henry said to his Captain
Dat a man ain't nothin' but a man.
"Lawd, before I'd let a man beat me drivin' steel,
I'm goin' die wid dis hammer in my hand, Lawd,
Lawd, Lawd,
Die wid dis hammer in my hand."
2. When John Henry was a little boy
He sit down on his father's knee.
He p'int his hand at a piece of steel,
Said, "Dat goin' be the death of me, Lawd, Lawd,
Lawd,
Dat goin' to be the death of me."
3. John Henry said to his captain,
"Captain, w'en you go to town,
Won't you bring me back a nine-pound hammer, my
captain?
I'm goin' drive dis steel on down, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,
Drive dis steel on down."
4. John Henry went upon the mountain,
Had a hundred and forty men.
W'en de sun commence to shine and de steam fall
down,
Leave no one to drive but him, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,
No one to drive but him.
5. He said, "Weh get your shoes, little woman,
And your dress all trimmed so fine?"
"Lawd, I get my shoes from a railroad man,
I get my dress from a driver in de mine, Lawd, Lawd,
Lawd,
Dress from a driver in de mine."
6. Said, "Weh you goin' now, little woman,
Wid your dress all trimmed in red?"
Said, "I'm goin' right down to the railroad track,
Weh my husband John Henry fell dead, Lawd, Lawd,
Lawd,
My husband John Henry fell dead."

The musical transcriptions provided by Johnson are approximate and do not accurately reflect the complex vocal and rhythmic ornamentations employed by the singers, but the recording may be clear enough to permit more accurate transcriptions if anyone so desires.

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Retrieving the Orson Welles' Radio Broadcasts

Glenn Simonelli

Earlier this year, the Voyager Company released *Theatre of the Imagination: Radio Stories by Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre*, a six-hour collection of Welles' radio work restored and issued on audio-only laser videodisc and audio cassettes. One of the first steps in the restoration process was taken at the Archives of Traditional Music: the digital remastering of Welles' acetate disc recordings of the live radio broadcasts. These discs, made by radio stations before the development of magnetic tape, are now in the collection of the Lilly Library at Indiana University.

Because the Archives was equipped to accommodate the physical characteristics of these recordings—78 RPM discs, many of them 16" in diameter and with unusually large grooves—we were enlisted to provide copies. There are very few high quality turntables available that can play 78 RPM discs, and turntables that can play 16" discs are even rarer.

The first step in dubbing the transcription discs was to determine the best size and shape of stylus for each disc. I had five different styli at my disposal for this project, ranging in size from 2.5 to 3.7 mil. Four of them were designed specifically to play old 78 RPM acetate transcription discs. Their shapes varied somewhat, but they were all truncated, that is, cut off at the tip so that instead of ending in a fine point, they were flat at the bottom. The reason for this is that by cutting off the tip, the stylus is kept from tracking the bottom of the record groove where most of the dirt and dust accumulate, and consequently, gives a quieter reproduction.

The fifth stylus was a fairly ordinary .7 mil elliptical, the kind used to play modern stereo LPs. While it was not designed to play discs like the ones we were dealing with here, it did come in handy on one occasion.

In determining the correct stylus for a particular disc, there were three criteria to be considered: tracking, distortion, and noise—in that order of importance. Tracking was fairly cut-and-dried. If a stylus was too wide to play a disc without skips or snags, it was rejected.

Distortion and noise were more subtle phenomena and had to be evaluated subjectively through trial and error. Often there was an inverse relationship between the two. One stylus might yield a relatively quiet but slightly distorted signal, while a different, usually smaller stylus would reproduce the signal more accurately, but with a higher level of background noise. When this was the case, the lack of distortion took precedence over the lack of noise, the assumption being that background hiss, pops, and crackles could always be filtered out later, but an inaccurately reproduced signal would be impossible to correct.

Once the stylus was selected, the rest of the process was uneventful in most cases. There was no attempt at re-equalization since that was being done at Sonic Solutions in San Francisco, using a state-of-the-art digital noise reduction process. Much of the time it was merely a matter of playing the discs, converting the signal to pulse code modulation, a form of digital encoding, and