

THE SAME OLD BLUES CRAP: SELLING THE BLUES AT FAT POSSUM RECORDS

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JACQUI SAHAGIAN

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogates the marketing strategies of the Oxford, Mississippi-based record label Fat Possum, which was founded in the early 1990s by Matthew Johnson with the goal of recording obscure hill country blues artists. Fat Possum gained recognition for its raw-sounding recordings of bluesmen, including R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, Cedell Davis, and T-Model Ford, as well as its irreverent marketing techniques. Adopting the tagline “not the same old blues crap,” Fat Possum asserted that its blues were both different from and superior to all other blues music. This thesis argues that while Fat Possum claimed to be a disruptive force in the blues world, the label actually repeated marketing strategies that have been used to sell the blues since the genre was first sold during the 1920s race records era. The label’s use of edgy, punk and hip-hop influenced aesthetics made its work seem daring and new, and were perfectly targeted towards an audience of young music consumers in the 1990s who were fans of grunge and rap but perhaps unfamiliar with blues music. A closer look at these records reveals that the imagery and rhetoric found on Fat Possum’s albums is riddled with troubling stereotypes about black men from the rural South. Fat Possum seized on the black badman, a character that has served various purposes in African American folklore and culture since slavery, and leveraged this trope to sell its bluesmen using a minstrel caricature of the uneducated, violent, oppressed, oversexed black man. Matthew Johnson’s role as a white male label head selling black music also echoes blues history. Using Grace Hale’s term “rebel persona,” I analyze how Johnson fits into a lineage with other white men who have shaped our understandings of blues music, including Alan Lomax, Harry Smith, and James McKune. An analysis of Fat Possum reveals that contemporary audiences are still being sold blues music with the same racist tropes that were used to market blues during the race records era, and that much of the “same old blues crap” is indeed present in Fat Possum’s work.

## DEDICATION

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## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I seek to trace the ways in which the Oxford, Mississippi-based Fat Possum Records echoes retrograde marketing techniques common throughout blues history while presenting itself as a rebellious force in both the blues world and the music industry at large. Fat Possum gained notoriety and praise in the 1990s for its raw-sounding blues releases, introducing the outside world to the riff-based droning blues form associated with the Mississippi hill country. The label successfully drew attention to the ways this type of blues served as the roots of the alternative rock, grunge, and rap that were dominating mainstream airwaves, gaining a young audience that had not previously been interested in blues music. Part of what the company used to gain this attention was marketing imagery and rhetoric that used degrading stereotypes about black men and the rural South, which exoticized the label's bluesmen and enticed audiences into buying a product that was seemingly authentic and strange. Fat Possum constructed its bluesmen as being violent, lascivious, uneducated, impoverished drunkards, all stereotypes that date back to minstrelsy and have been used to uphold white supremacy. While Fat Possum casts itself as being different from and superior to other blues labels, similar work has been done by record labels, folklorists, and record collectors throughout the history of the genre. Most blues fans consider themselves politically liberal and forward-thinking regarding race, but Fat Possum's branding shows that such fans buy products using imagery that should have been left on the minstrel stage.

University of Mississippi student Matthew Johnson formed Fat Possum records in the early 1990s, working with renowned music writer and blues historian Robert Palmer. They produced records by Mississippi hill country bluesmen that played in juke joints around Oxford, the small college town where the University of Mississippi is located, but who had not been widely heard outside their local communities. Palmer had encountered Mississippi hill country blues through his own research and brought attention to the genre with his 1992 documentary *Deep Blues*, which explored contemporary blues in different regions of Mississippi. Hill country blues artists, including Junior Kimbrough, R.L. Burnside, and Jessie Mae Hemphill, made memorable appearances in the hill country segment of the documentary, and attention from the film brought adventurous tourists to Kimbrough's long-running juke joint outside Holly Springs. Palmer teamed up with Johnson to produce and write liner notes for Fat Possum's early releases by Kimbrough, Burnside, and Cedell Davis, artists who had only been recorded intermittently in the past but were respected musical patriarchs in their communities.

Fat Possum's recording approaches were at odds with what Johnson felt were the common tactics used in the blues industry during the early 1990s. "The same old blues crap" that he criticizes in the label's rhetoric and in interviews includes the more polished blues produced by other record labels and folklore recordings from music scholars. In an interview with *The Independent*, Johnson explains that he envisioned his label and its Mississippi-based blues artists as being antithetical to the slick, urbane blues records being released at the time. "There was a sort of, quote/unquote, 'revival' going on then, but everyone that I liked, locally, was not relevant to it, they weren't even getting recorded doing it. But it seemed a lot more imaginative than the shit that was going on before then, which was all real slick Chicago stuff - it was like, 'Who's the next Stevie Ray Vaughn?' kind of bullshit," Johnson said (Gill). Writers often

contrasted Fat Possum against other blues labels like Alligator and Blind Pig (Gordon). Johnson has a particular disdain for Alligator Records's brand of feel-good party blues, but as a *Spin* profile from 1997 points out, he dislikes almost all blues music but his own.

While Johnson has the evangelical fervor of a purist, as far as the blues establishment is concerned he's more of a heretic. He hates harmonicas, acoustic guitars, nearly all Chicago-style blues, the crackly sound of old 78s, and any recordings 'with a scholarly smell to them.' 'There's no blues artists I really like except my own and some dead ones,' snorts Johnson, devout only in the belief that nothing is sacred and that everything in contemporary blues sucks. 'All those blues labels, every day I can't go undo the work they do,' he maintains, running his hand through his tousled brown hair. 'All their bad taste. They're giving blues a horrible name.' Johnson saves most of his venom for the Chicago-based Alligator Records, founded by Bruce Iglauer in 1971 to release the relatively dissonant debut of Hound Dog Taylor, but which has since focused on tepid bar-band swill. 'How can you go from Hound Dog to that other shit he puts out?' exclaims Johnson (Rubin).

Johnson has been equally vocal about his hatred for folklore recordings, as I explore in Chapter 3. The fieldwork of music scholars is certainly a part of "the same old blues crap." Johnson told *New Yorker* writer Jay McInerney that he was suing the University of Memphis and renowned ethnomusicologist David Evans over early field recordings of R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough. "These folklorists want to lock up these blues guys and treat them like rats in a lab...The last thing I want to be is a folklorist and record records that no one will listen to," he told McInerney. So what is not crap, then? McInerney wrote that Johnson's goal as label head was "to illustrate the evolution of the authentic anarchic howl—from Charley Patton to Eminem."

To achieve that goal, Fat Possum privileged a raw, immediate sound by recording live in an attempt to capture the sonic environment experienced at a juke joint like Kimbrough's. This choice was not solely the label's. Artists like Burnside were known for refusing to play multiple takes of a song in the studio. Johnson felt that this approach countered the over-produced, slick urban blues recordings that were common at this time and that he openly detested. Another Fat

Possum trademark that led to much success for the label was the use of electronic remixes of blues songs created by notable producers, including Daft Punk. These remixes are influenced by both techno and hip-hop, which explicitly bridges the divide between blues and rap. Scholars and artists have long recognized the similarities between these genres, but many blues fans still refuse to acknowledge the shared heritage of blues and rap, and so much contemporary blues music has avoided making this connection because it needs the patronage of these fans.

For all the things that made Fat Possum's blues original and interesting, the label also recycled tropes that have been at work in blues throughout the genre's history. In this thesis, I seek to identify and examine the ways that Fat Possum reiterates problematic stereotypes regarding bluesmen and southern black men more generally in order to market its blues music to a young white audience unfamiliar with blues. Fat Possum's marketing imagery and rhetoric seemed new, edgy, and interesting, and was effective at reaching its targeted audience. But a close reading of the label's record covers, liner notes, and other promotional material reveals how Fat Possum repeats tropes that have been at work in blues marketing since the genre was first marketed during the race records boom of the 1920s. Fat Possum used stereotypes about southern black masculinity, cartoon imagery, and a white male authority figure in ways that have been done over and over throughout blues history. Fat Possum disguised these duplications by invoking the cultural heritage rap and punk music owe to blues in general and specifically hill country blues as played by Fat Possum's bluesmen. The aesthetic conceits of punk and rap were new and edgy and perfect for the historical moment of the early 1990s, when the label was founded and young audiences were devouring grunge and gangsta rap. Those aesthetics made it easy to miss the ways Fat Possum echoed blues history in its work.

In the introduction to the coffee table book *Darker Blues*, Johnson writes that he believes “bluesmen are supposed to be bad people.” In Chapter 1, I explore the figure of the black badman through African American history, paying close attention to how this character is invoked in African American vernacular music. It is clear from Fat Possum’s marketing that Johnson thought of the label’s artists as badmen: I seek to figure out why this idea about blues musicians exists in our culture, and how and why Fat Possum decided to use the badman stereotype to market its blues. I use studies of African American and American folklore and cultural history to survey badman and outlaw figures, real and fictional, and describe how the stories and songs featuring badmen have functioned in African American and American culture. Fat Possum’s use of this figure served two ends, I argue: 1. To appeal to fans of punk, grunge, and rap who were familiar with the more modern badmen that fronted their favorite genres and 2. To remind fans of older blues music of the blues badmen of the past. The badman has deep resonance in American culture from frontier boasting and slave tales to gangster rappers; blues badmen are one illustration of a larger phenomenon.

The studies on black masculinity in African American folklore, including *Born in a Mighty Bad Land* by Jerry Bryant, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* by Lawrence Levine, and *From Trickster to Badman* by John Roberts were all helpful for examining the history of the black badman throughout African American history. Adam Gussow’s article “Playing Chicken with the Train: Cowboy Troy’s Hick-Hop and the Transracial Country West” and Richard Slotkin’s influential literary study *Regeneration Through Violence* illustrate how the frontier of the American West has produced the badman or outlaw as a cultural trope in America, and show there were both white and black cowboys enacting violence and making myths on the American frontier. Zandria Robinson, Tricia Rose, Ali Colleen Neff, and Elijah Wald have all written about

the connections between blues and rap, one of which is the boasting tradition known as the dozens that folklorists believe has roots in Africa. This boasting has evolved the badman archetype prevalent amongst performers in both genres. Angela Davis's study *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, supported by work from Neff, Gussow, and William Ferris, reveals that there are and have always been plenty of badwomen present in these various folk traditions and in blues, even though Fat Possum has never signed a female blues performer. While the badman archetype has long played an important role in black culture, this figure becomes problematic when a record label places its artists into this trope rather than allowing their artists to represent themselves and their music. While record labels will almost always be involved in some aspect of marketing and image-making with the majority of recording artists, and molding black artists into racist caricatures is not new in any genre, including blues, this has greater consequences than making a musician's career dissatisfying and needs to be continuously interrogated. It is worth noting that in toasts and ballads, the badman gets his just desserts for the terror he has wrought, whether that terror was fair revenge or cold-blooded cruelty. When Fat Possum places its artists into the badman role, it is dooming them to receive punishment for their badness.

In Chapter 2, I examine Fat Possum's record artwork, liner notes, and other promotional material to uncover the stereotypes about southern, rural, black men the label used to sell its blues to a young audience unfamiliar with the genre. These same stereotypes have been utilized in selling the blues since the 1920s, which undercuts Fat Possum's tagline "not the same old blues crap." In this chapter I perform close readings of many album covers and liner notes from Fat Possum releases of the early 1990s to the early 2000s. Both Matthew Johnson and Robert Palmer wrote liner notes for Fat Possum's records that invoked a variety of problematic stereotypes about black men in order to make the music seem edgy, exciting, or different. (These

records and promotional materials were accessed in the Blues Archive in Archives and Special Collections at the University of Mississippi.) Gender theory on masculinity in general and black masculinity specifically offered crucial assistance in close reading this material. Riché Richardson's study *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South* helped pinpoint the ways in which a rural context has served to further marginalize black men, who are already subject to numerous stereotypes based on race and gender. I additionally use social theory by Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva to explore the ways disgust and impurity help create fascination and desire in an audience. Fat Possum chose to hire artists to create cartoons and comic strips depicting its artists for some of its album covers and for the coffee table book *Darker Blues* (2002) the label published about itself. Close reading these cartoons alongside an examination of cartoons used to promote blues released during the race records era, which have been written about by Karl Hagstrom Miller, Jeff Todd Titon, and Mark Dolan, illustrate my point that Fat Possum is selling records with the help of stereotyped images in a way that strongly echoes earlier practices.

In Chapter 3, I focus on Fat Possum founder Matthew Johnson, placing him in a lineage of white men who have influenced and interpreted the blues for audiences throughout the genre's history. I rely on several revisionist histories of the blues and folk music for my reading of Johnson, including Grace Hale's *A Nation of Outsiders*, Marybeth Hamilton's *In Search of the Blues*, Karl Hagstrom Miller's *Segregating Sound*, and Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk*. These scholars have done important work establishing how white masculinity has shaped our understanding of the blues at different moments in history. I extend the scope of this work by showing how this narrative has followed us into the twenty-first century through Fat Possum's blues marketing, a continued obsession with particular markers of authenticity, and Matthew Johnson's "rebel persona." I refer to the white men who have interpreted the blues for audiences,

rather than allowing blues artists to interpret and present their own art, as “white male blues influencers,” but Benjamin Filene has also called them “cultural brokers” or “cultural mediators” (5-6).

In this chapter I interrogate Johnson’s attempts to construct himself as a rebel figure who understood the blues better than everyone else through evidence found in interviews and the 2002 documentary about the label, *Can You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen*. I also consulted the liner notes that Johnson wrote for various Fat Possum releases. Johnson’s rebellious persona is an example of Hale’s “romance of the outsider” paradigm, which began, she argues, among disaffected middle-class white males searching for purpose in post-war America and continues to operate into the present moment, with destructive results. Hale writes about several blues influencers who exhibited the romance of the outsider, including Alan Lomax, Harry Smith, and James McKune. By putting on a rebel persona, Johnson revealed how much he had in common with the blues establishment, rather than distancing himself from it as he desired.

Altogether, this thesis shows how Matthew Johnson and Fat Possum Records leveraged the black badman archetype to sell hill country blues to a new audience of younger punk and rap music fans that were perhaps unfamiliar with the blues by using stereotypes about rural-dwelling southern black men. Johnson was a successful blues influencer because of his rebel persona, which placed him in a lineage of blues influencers and gave him credibility among fans of alternative rock, punk, grunge, and rap. Despite these criticisms, Fat Possum released some of

the most original and interesting blues records of its time, and brought well-deserved exposure to the bluesmen the label recorded.<sup>1</sup>

Even more importantly, Fat Possum was gutsy. Johnson's scorn for the average blues "crap" meant he did not care about appealing to the typical blues fan; in fact they were not even his intended audience. This allowed the label to do what many blues artists and labels avoid; draw the obvious parallels between blues and rap. Fat Possum's unique remixes of blues songs adamantly proclaimed that blues was still a relevant genre into the twenty-first century, with performers that were badder and more raw than your most untamed punk or rap star, releasing songs that somehow sounded old and new at the same time. Fat Possum began at a time when blues music seemed located in a distant past, something that could only be witnessed from afar. Robert Johnson's complete recordings were released on a boxed set in 1990 that eventually went platinum and spurred a wave of blues tourism to the Mississippi Delta, with fans eager to explore what had inspired and destroyed the iconic bluesman (Billboard). Fat Possum, for all its faults, showed those unfamiliar with the region's local music scenes that there was still plenty of blues in Mississippi, and it did not sound like Robert Johnson.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of whether the artists were compensated fairly for their work is outside the scope of this thesis. It is worth noting that various family members of the deceased bluesmen who recorded for Fat Possum have sued the label, but also that Fat Possum has had its own legal

## CHAPTER 1

### “BLUESMEN ARE SUPPOSED TO BE BAD PEOPLE”: FAT POSSUM’S BLUES BADMAN

In the introduction to the coffee table book *Darker Blues*, Matthew Johnson writes, “Fat Possum is always being criticized for being disrespectful, for not being reverent in our marketing and publicity. Old bluesmen are supposed to be bad people.” Before examining the techniques Matthew Johnson used to market the bluesmen signed to Fat Possum as “bad people,” an historical analysis of the badman figure in the blues and African American culture is necessary to understand why a blues fan like Johnson would hold to the idea that “bluesmen are supposed to be bad people.”

The figure of the black badman, who was a major presence in African American folklore since before the blues developed, continues to fascinate and unnerve Americans into the twenty-first century. Seizing on the trope allowed Johnson and Fat Possum to market bluesmen using a narrative that would be recognized by both hardcore blues fans and younger fans of rap and grunge, who might not be familiar with blues but would know the badman from rap and rock music. Constructing the bluesmen on Fat Possum as black badmen served to remind the listener that country bluesmen were once considered a dangerous threat to the social fabric, before their music was consumed almost exclusively by older white men and they were neutered of their dangerous power.

Using record covers and liner notes, Fat Possum created a version of the blues badman to market its artists. Fat Possum's bluesmen are badman heroes that connect blues and rap through a dark sensibility and boasting swagger that have antecedents in the proto-blues toasts and ballads praising mythological figures like Bad-Lan' Stone and Stagger Lee, characters who would wreak havoc any time, anywhere merely for pure, evil pleasure (Levine, 412-3). Using this narrative was ingenious because it extended the historical connections of Fat Possum's blues before and after the time frame of the blues genre's prime. Ballads glorified the black badman and narrated his grisly end before the blues is thought to have developed, and the black badman still earns praise and punishment in the form of today's rap stars. Fat Possum's bluesmen are connected to a tradition more ancient than the blues, as well as musicians creating new art forms in the contemporary moment, because of the way Fat Possum built this badman mythology around them.

Why did Matthew Johnson believe that bluesmen are supposed to be bad people, and market the artists on Fat Possum this way? We do not know much about what the iconic Delta bluesmen like Robert Johnson and Charley Patton were like as individuals, if they really were "bad people" or not, but we do know that they consciously adopted badman personas when they became performers. Contemporaries of Robert Johnson, such as David "Honeyboy" Edwards, have said that the most famous blues badman was not a bad man at all, but that he was a mild-mannered person who was felled by a weakness for whiskey and women as well as the general precarity of black life in Mississippi during the 1930s. Johnson is thought of as a badman because of the lyrics he sang—"The stuff I got'll bust your brains out"—and the crossroads myth he created, linking him to the Devil.

The black badman of pre-blues tales and boasts influenced the blues as the genre developed, informing the imagery in blues songs and the personas of some of blues' most well-known and charismatic performers. The switch from third to first person that is considered to be a calling card of the blues moved the badman from being the character that is sung about, as in the ballads, to being the singer. "A ballad symbolizes the desires of the suppressed Negro singer when he can see no way of overcoming his oppression. It is a vocal dream of wish-fulfillment," Paul Oliver writes in his early study on the blues. "The blues singer is himself the race hero, and in this lies his popularity and the phenomenal success of the blues as a musical form" (297-8). Historian and folklorist Lawrence Levine explains that the exaggerated badman we find in ballads and toasts developed after slavery, just as blues did, because "[t]he creation of these kinds of heroes required the growth of a more pronounced Western orientation, the decline of the sacred universe, and the growth of the individualist ethos among black Americans" (401). The move from "we" to "I" in American ethos and African American folk song led to songs about a selfish hero causing trouble with no cares about the consequences, then to blues told from his perspective.

There is some debate about how African versus how American the black badman is. Elijah Wald has found him in Africa while studying the dozens, identifying in the rhymed insults he studied in America a "dialogue [that] is strikingly similar to the formal phrases that the Nigerian writer Amuzie Chimezie described Igbo boys using to begin a traditional insult game, and a teenager on the island of Tobago told Roger Abrahams of making similar pacts before rounds of mother rhyming" (84). Literature scholar Fahamisha Patricia Brown has studied the boasting tradition in African praise-songs. Meanwhile Levine asserts that "tales of exaggeration" featuring the black badman did not develop until African slaves were granted freedom and

socialized into American society, with its emphasis on the personal over the communal. Therefore, the badman trope “can be seen as indications of acculturation to a Western Euro-American ethos in which the individual was at the center of his universe. At the same time they give evidence of the continued existence and vitality of a separate Afro-American culture” (407).

It could be argued that self-praising folk rhymes are a black tradition still practiced in Africa. But in America, contact with Europeans and the frontier ideology developed in response to colonizing the Americas added to the black badman’s character and helps to explain why the outlaw trope has long been appealing to Americans regardless of race. In his article about the country-rapper Cowboy Troy, Adam Gussow argues that white influence on the tradition in America should not be ignored in favor of a purely African one. “The problem with this [African] genealogy isn’t that it’s wrong, it’s that it’s incomplete. It constructs a ‘well-bounded, organically unified race tradition’ by leaving out the other great American tradition of ‘self-affirming voices with their ‘annunciatory ‘I am’s’ from which Cowboy Troy, and rap as a whole, also draw their inspiration: Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, and the ring-tailed roarers of the old Southwestern frontier” (57).

Briefly turning to the outlaw mythology of the western frontier is useful for situating the badman as a uniquely American trope that cuts across racial boundaries, which can help explain why a small record company in the 1990s successfully used the figure to market its artists. It can also explain why the badman is seen all over American popular culture through the present day. Gussow argues that exaggerated self-praise in tall tales from black ballads and the frontier simultaneously developed and influenced each other. “Although we might be tempted to code such frontier bluster as ‘white,’ if only in an attempt to establish it as parallel to, and distinct from, the African American tradition just outlined, the truth is that both cultural streams have

long intermingled” (58). Levine also identifies this, and makes some distinctions between how African Americans and whites portrayed badmen in their mythology. “[T]he crucial cultural difference in these folk figures is that whites have tended to sanitize and civilize them, to make them benefactors who dispense social justice to the entire group, while Negroes have refrained almost entirely from this form of ritual” (419). Levine writes that the badmen in the folk tales from blacks and whites were very similar, as were the actual outlaws upon which they were based. And yet, the way the tales interpreted these characters functioned much differently in black and white communities. “[W]hatever needs bad men filled, black folk refused to romantically embellish or sentimentalize them. Missing entirely from black lore was the Robin Hood figure so familiar in the folklore of other Americans and other cultures” (415). In the African American versions of these tales, badman heroes were cruel men and met cruel ends, while white tales imagined white badman heroes like Robin Hood and Jesse James as killing and robbing for an ultimately good cause.

While the tales might look different in black and white folklore, the violent outlaw of the frontier has universal appeal to Americans. Richard Slotkin has argued in his studies of American myth-making and literature that, “[i]n American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness” (4). If, as Slotkin asserts, “myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living,” then it makes sense that we are now living with the badmen of the frontier in black artists such as Fat Possum’s bluesmen and the country-rapper Cowboy Troy (5). While Mississippi is not considered part of the Old West in the American imagination, it was a similarly wild territory when it was being settled. Pioneers recognized the

richness of the land in the Mississippi River Delta but had to battle deep forests, disease-carrying mosquitos, and constant floods in order to clear the land for farming.<sup>2</sup> Mississippi remained a wild frontier for longer than other areas of the American South, and it retains some of that frontier spirit through this history. Fat Possum equates Mississippi, specifically the Mississippi hill country where its most famous bluesmen come from, with the American frontier in some of its rhetoric as a way of portraying its bluesmen as badmen in the same vein as the black cowboys of the Old West, wild men who could survive under the harshest of conditions.

What are the characteristics of this black badman, who has been at the center of American pop culture since the end of slavery? The capacity for violence, an aura of the supernatural, and superhuman abilities are his three major qualities, and all of those are applied to Fat Possum's bluesmen in the label's marketing. First the term "bad" is a slippery one; its meaning depends on who says it. "In black parlance," Levine explains, "the adjective bad does not invariably have negative connotations...the term has been used to describe those who were admired because they had the strength, courage, and ability to flout the limitations imposed by white society" (420). Levine refers to the badman as "the extended man" or "the superman," emphasizing the way in which these tales used exaggeration. "In the exaggerated hero, black folk created secular, human figures who could contravene the established mores and standards of the society; figures who could pursue an independent course and look within themselves for the necessary strength... the badman...transgressed totally all of the moral and legal bounds of society" (407). While both black and white folklore featured outlaw figures, in black tales the outlaw's abilities allowed him to, briefly, overcome the obstacles set in his way by white society, and even violently destroy white enemies. "From the late nineteenth century black lore was

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<sup>22</sup> See: Cobb, James C. "Plantation Frontier." *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 7–28.

filled with tales, toasts, and songs of hard, merciless toughs and killers confronting and generally vanquishing their adversaries without hesitation and without remorse” (407-8). The black badman’s adversaries were not always white, but sometimes they were, and when they were they could symbolize the entirety of an unjust society. Like later signifying in the blues, singing a badman ballad about a larger-than-life black man who is not afraid to kill white people could serve as cathartic release for black folks living in a society that promises equality yet remains unequal.

Perhaps because he does not show remorse for his actions, or maybe because of the cynically realistic worldview that these tales, toasts, and songs share with the blues, the black badman is almost always punished for his misdeeds. Literature scholar Jerry Bryant writes that badmen are “bound inescapably by a white law” with the balladeer coldly narrating the bad man’s suffering and death after convincing the listener to empathize with him and hope for his victory against the unfair, white society (13). John Roberts argues that black communities did not idolize the black badman, as he wreaked havoc through them, and “[t]he ambivalent attitude toward black badmen was nowhere more evident than in the fact that, in the folklore celebrating their deeds, they were invariably condemned and punished for their crime” (211). Bryant takes a more sympathetic view: “These men are guilty, and that is what gives pathos to their plight. They are caught in a system of justice that convicts and punishes. Their guilt, though, the balladeers seem to say, does not efface their pain...At their best, the ballads do not render any kind of moral verdict or purport to teach any moral lesson” (18). Levine writes that, “The bandit’s insistence on individual autonomy both appealed and repelled, and the folk ritually paid homage to the nascent nihilism of the bandit even as they punished it by making certain that the outlaw was destroyed at the end of his saga” (417).

Before witnessing his inevitable downfall, the audience of the story is impressed by the badman's incredible achievements. Bryant writes that the badman's goal is to "build a reputation, create awe in the timid and fear in competitors" (1) and induce "alarm as well as a reluctant admiration" (3) in his community. To accomplish this, the exaggerated badman folk heroes from these stories "were gifted with extraordinary, often extrahuman powers" (Levine, 403). The badman can have incredible strength, an insatiable sex drive, and even the ability work magic. In some versions of one of the most famous ballads, Stagger Lee is described as a man so bad he dies, goes to Hell, and takes over the place when he gets there. In one variant of his story, upon arriving in Hell, Stagolee throws a sadomasochistic party with the Devil rather than suffering. "Stagolee, he told the Devil, / Says, 'Come on and have some fun— / You stick me with your pitchfork, / I'll shoot you with my forty-one'" (Bryant, 14). John Henry is described as being so strong he can use a hammer to out-work a steam-driven drill at laying railroad tracks (Levine, 425). Railroad Bill, who was based on a real outlaw and who Roberts calls a "representative bad man hero," shoots a cop—a white cop presumably, given the tale takes place in the South—and lives on the lam for years hopping trains, evading the law, and preying on black communities, miraculously able to evade the numerous people that are after him (200).

As the trickster and conjurer figures from African American folklore of the slavery period influenced each other to create the badman, it was believed that some of his supernatural powers were "acquired from the Devil or his influence in the world" (Roberts, 200). Railroad Bill was rumored to be a conjurer who "could transform himself when threatened by the law. With posses close behind him, he would turn himself into a sheep, a brown dog, a red fox and watch them drive by" (Levine, 411). Often these supernatural powers could be sexual, as in racy versions of John Henry that illustrate steel-driving was not the only thing he was good at. "When

John Henry was a baby, / You could hold him in your hand. / But when he got nineteen years old, / He could stand that pussy like a man” (Levine, 423). Levine writes that these superpowers created a character that was “not only a man apart but a man above: above the statutory law, above the judicial process, above the normal restrictions and expectations that fashion the lives of modern men and women. It was this solitariness and superiority that destined bad men, in the legends that were woven about them, to celebration and destruction” (417). These exaggerations turn the black badman into a larger-than-life character who leaves the listener of the tale spell-bound and awe-struck, even if they do not approve of his actions.

Some music writers and scholars have argued that ballads and toasts praising the black badman are of minor importance in studying the blues, as they are musically dissimilar from the blues in comparison to other black folk song traditions such as work songs or spirituals. Robert Palmer writes that “songster ballads” provided “some imagery and some guitar patterns” for the blues, and were one of several genres that laid the foundation for the blues, but jump-ups and field hollers were much closer kin to the blues musically, and so he says little else about the ballad tradition (43). This is a fairly typical analysis, as many blues scholars and music journalists fail to note the influence the ballad tradition had on the blues. Paul Oliver writes off the ballads as creations of a hopeless people. “Whilst the ballad singer projected on his heroes the successes that he could not believe could be his own, the blues singer considers his own ability to achieve them. The ballad hero of noble proportions has little relevance to modern life but the blues is realistic enough for the singer to declare his successes and failures with equal impartiality” (297-8). What these writers fail to recognize is how the bluesmen adopted the persona of the badman sung about in the ballads to create the now-stereotypical image of the bad black bluesman, a trope so ingrained that Matthew Johnson can write “bluesmen are supposed to

be bad people” and we understand his assumption. A ballad’s use of dark imagery and nihilistic endings that leave the listener questioning the point of the story, their own feelings about the badman character, and the meaning of existence in a cruel and violent world, influenced storytelling and mood in blues as well.

The archetypal example of the blues badman is Robert Johnson, the bluesman who allegedly sold his soul to the Devil at the crossroads somewhere in the Mississippi Delta in exchange for unparalleled guitar-playing abilities, then suffered a mysterious, violent early death to pay for his sins. While he serves as the archetype for the blues badman now, Johnson’s contemporaries remembered him as an easy-going, talented young musician who fell victim to a love of alcohol and women. David “Honeyboy” Edwards says in his autobiography that Johnson “was a nice person. He wasn’t a hellraiser. He wasn’t violent. I never heard him arguing with nobody” (102). Johnson’s badman image comes not from life, but from his lyrics, which utilize chilling images of the Devil and describe Johnson’s eternally wandering soul, as well as his purposeful adoption of a sort of creation myth in which he claims he sold his soul to the Devil to gain the skill to play guitar.

Robert Palmer has suggested that Johnson likely made up this story to woo listeners, possibly inspired by his contemporary Tommy Johnson, who told people the exact same tale. Palmer writes that Tommy Johnson, “acquired a sinister reputation to go with his new persona, a reputation he assiduously cultivated. When his credulous brother LeDell asked him how he had learned to play so well in such a short time, Tommy told him, with calculated dramatic flourishes, a story of having sold his soul to the Devil” (59). For my purposes what is most important to note here is not the alleged connection to the Devil, but that Johnson “assiduously cultivated” a “sinister reputation.” Palmer goes on to write that Tommy Johnson, “affected a

trickster's personality. He took to carrying a large rabbit's foot around with him and displaying it often, and his performances were spectacularly acrobatic" (60). The crossroads myth later became associated with the more famous of the two Johnsons. Selling his soul to the Devil seemed an adequate explanation for the incredible improvement in musicianship that Robert Johnson displayed in a short period of time. Palmer writes, "Robert probably encouraged the rumor, as Tommy Johnson had years earlier" (113). The two Johnsons were not the only bluesmen that used a bad man personality to market themselves. The bluesman Peetie Wheatstraw billed himself as "The Devil's Son-in-Law" or "the High Sheriff from Hell" and "[i]n his 'Peetie Wheatstraw Stomps,' he advertised his sexual prowess and bragged of his close association with the Devil" (Palmer, 115-6). Gussow has argued that Wheatstraw adopted this identity as a move to usurp white power; after all, if the Devil is a white man and Wheatstraw is the Devil's son-in-law, then who does that mean Wheatstraw is sleeping with? Here are early Delta blues musicians recognizing the power of the badman and transforming themselves into him, rather than just singing about him.

Scholars and music journalists writing about the blues since the mid-twentieth century have been fascinated by badman personalities. This interest has resulted in a conflation between the personas men like Robert and Tommy Johnson and Peetie Wheatstraw would put on, and who these men actually were. More people likely know about Robert Johnson's deal with the Devil (or more accurately the Yoruba orisha Legba, trickster god of the crossroads (Palmer, 60)) at the crossroads than know any of Johnson's songs, though he is considered to be the most influential bluesman. Details about a bluesman's violence or drunkenness are frequently foregrounded in studies about the blues. In Samuel Charters's 1959 book *The Country Blues*, his biographical sketch of Texas bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson includes such details as, "He'd

finish the night drunkenly fumbling with one of the girls, his guitar shoved under the chair so nobody would step on it. It was a raw, dirty life, but Lemon was successful at it” (61), and “Lemon, by this time, was a dirty, dissolute man, interested in very little besides women and liquor. At the end of a recording session, Williams would have a few dollars for him, a bottle, and a prostitute” (64).

Alan Lomax’s *The Land Where the Blues Began*, which was written near the end of his career and details some of his most famous fieldwork in Mississippi during the early 1940’s, also shows a fascination with the badman running through fifty-plus years of highly influential folklore scholarship. Lomax emphasizes Mississippi as a location characterized by its violence: “Country people are not afraid to look Death in the face. He is a familiar in their lives, especially in the violent jungle of the Delta” (14). Much of this 500-page memoir combined with ethnography is consumed by describing the violence of the black experience in the South, which Lomax sees as a key ingredient in the creation of the blues. “The world of the blues was no child’s garden of verses. It was frontier, it was ghetto; it was also shaped by old African traditions... [it] now prepared American black youngsters to fight for their neighborhoods and to survive in the harsh worlds of slavery, peonage, and, often, prison” (370). Though he is more sympathetic than Charters, his descriptions of the bluesmen he recorded similarly emphasize a badman trope. In an often-quoted passage describing his recording session with Son House, Lomax’s writing is obsessed by the potential House’s body has for work and violence: “[H]is voice guttural and hoarse with passion, ripping apart the surface of the music like his tractor-driven deep plow ripped apart the wet black earth in the springtime, making the sap of the earth song run, while his powerful, work-hard hands snatched strange chords out of the steel strings

the way they had snatched so many tons of cotton out of brown thorny cotton bolls in the fall” (18).

While Robert Palmer recognizes how bluesmen like Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, and Peetie Wheatstraw consciously adopted badman personalities, he too falls victim to romanticizing the badman blues musician in his writing. This is particularly important to notice for analyzing Fat Possum’s work, as Palmer helped found Fat Possum in the early 1990s, produced some of the label’s first records, and wrote liner notes for albums by Junior Kimbrough, R.L. Burnside, and Cedell Davis. In his 1981 book *Deep Blues*, Palmer emphasizes the badman elements of many of the blues musicians he profiles. He writes that Charley Patton harbored “lingering rage, which he tended to take out on his women, sometimes by beating them with a handy guitar. He suffered his dark moods and his occasional repentances and conversions, but he also had fun, or something like it” (57). Tommy Johnson is “a compulsive womanizer. He wasn’t much of a drinker when he left, but after a couple years in the Delta, he was already well settled into a pattern of acute alcoholism and would drink almost anything—Sterno, shoe polish, denatured alcohol” (59). Son House is described as “a failed preacher, convicted murderer, solid if rudimentary guitarist” (79).

Violence and alcohol are emphasized in these biographical sketches to show the badness of these bluesmen. While these men did live precarious lives that involved violence, there is a difference between the way Tommy Johnson consciously adopted a trickster persona and how Palmer writes about his willingness to drink shoe polish. When the artist creates their own badman image, they can have some control over how they are interpreted by their audience. When an interpreter such as a journalist or blues scholar romanticizes and exaggerates the

badness of a blues musician for an audience, then the musician can more easily fall victim to oppressive stereotypes about black masculinity.

The moment Palmer gets most carried away in *Deep Blues* is in his description of Robert Johnson's final recording session in Dallas in June of 1937. Johnson is here imbued with the supernatural ability to predict his own approaching death, the type of "extrahuman" ability one would find in the tales of exaggeration studied by Levine. While Palmer dismisses the "school of thought that sees voodoo symbolism in almost every line Robert Johnson ever sang," he writes that these final recordings are "rife with omens" (127). "Hellhound on My Trail" and "Me and the Devil Blues" were both recorded at this session, songs filled with images of misery, restlessness, hell, and death. Those may now be among Johnson's best-known songs, but at the time he was alive none of his recordings matched the success of the sexual innuendo-filled "Terraplane Blues." Palmer knows this and writes this, but he still cannot resist infusing those final recording sessions and Johnson with the supernatural qualities of the badman who has made a deal with the Devil. "When Robert Johnson was recording in Texas, he wasn't playing for the angels, but he knew he was playing for posterity," Palmer writes, giving Johnson the ability to see his own future (129). Palmer then adds an anecdote from the eccentric blues researcher Mack McCormick, who claims to have interviewed several of Johnson's children. The children told McCormick that before Johnson died he visited each of them, leaving them copies of his records. Palmer gives us this anecdote because he cannot resist the implication that Johnson could sense his end approaching, having gained supernatural powers from his mythic encounter with the Devil at the crossroads. Though Palmer critiques others who are inclined to see "voodoo symbolism" in all of Johnson's songs, here he could not keep the idea of the occult badman out of his own biographical portrait.

When Matthew Johnson asserts that “old bluesmen are supposed to be bad people,” badman images, both the self-made personas and the portraits by blues writers, are what he references. The blues’s heritage in badman ballads resulted in some of the most influential and charismatic bluesmen creating badman artistic personas. These stage personas and sordid biographical details were then analyzed and obsessed over by writers and academics that began studying the blues in the middle of the twentieth century. When a white interlocutor retells a bluesman’s badness, it removes the musician’s agency to make the badness performative or positive, and simply renders them violent and evil people, perhaps with supernatural powers, who play eerie, bone-chilling music. Fat Possum has recognized these badmen throughout blues history and replicated them with their own musicians. The label’s marketing and rhetoric hammers the badman narrative down the audience’s throat, constantly reminding us that bluesmen are “supposed” to be bad, and placing its artists into a prepackaged persona of the blues badman.

Junior Kimbrough, R.L. Burnside, Cedell Davis, and T-Model Ford were marketed by Fat Possum as black badmen, characters that could have inspired a ballad in the 1890s but also are obvious antecedents to the rap stars of the 1990s. Fat Possum marketed all of its blues artists using bits and pieces of this trope, but these four bluesmen embodied the black bad man image most fully. Kimbrough was already a larger-than-life figure in the Mississippi hill country around Holly Springs before he recorded for Fat Possum, known for the raucous house parties he would throw at his juke joint Junior’s Place. In the liner notes to Kimbrough’s album *All Night Long*, Palmer describes having a quasi-religious experience at Junior’s Place listening to Kimbrough’s droning guitar and drinking moonshine:

Crawling around in the dirt. Crawling around in the dirt between the rows of blooming, blinding white cotton in the field to the side of Junior’s old country juke, and this woman,

Lord she must've been sixty, she was out there crawling around in the dirt, *with* me, I'm not lyin'! Both of us out there in the sun, drunk on white lightin' in the middle of the day! And it was a *Sunday!* Amps turned up all the way inside the shack, drums making the floorboards boom, you could hear it fine. Yeah, out there in the dirt. Sometimes the music inside would be so intense, you'd think twice about going in. People would be clustered on the front porch, perched on the railing like birds, drinkin' out of Mason jars. And that one big room that was most of the house, that would just be throbbing with Junior's beat, Junior's rhythm... You went in that room, got in there between the band and the people dancing off it, you'd be dancing too, before you'd know it was happening. Like trance dancing, everybody breaking a sweat and the song would go on until their eyes were rolled back in their heads.

Palmer describes the juke joint festivities as taking place at the same time and day as, and so replacing, a typical southern Christian religious service, complete with actions mimicking the “holy rollers” of Pentecostal churches. He was not the only one to refer to Junior’s Place with religious undertones. In the notes to Kimbrough’s *Sad Days Lonely Nights* Larry Brown wrote that the juke joint “looks more like a shrine than anything else, and for the people who go there all the time, that’s probably what it is: a shrine to Junior’s music.”

Here Kimbrough simultaneously occupies the role of badman and religious figure, the conjurer evoked in African American folklore. Roberts argues that African American religious practice has played a role in the development of the black badman, seen in the slavery-era folk figure as the conjurer. Enslaved Africans would often enlist the help of a medicine man or conjurer for medical treatment, as slaves rightfully distrusted white doctors provided by masters, if or when masters bothered providing medical care. Conjurers were thus viewed as threats to white authority and were “frequently mentioned by whites who regarded their influence over enslaved Africans as a challenge to their own authority and designs” (65). This granted the conjurer more prestige in the black community. “On the one hand, the power to conjure assured enslaved Africans that the possession of a black skin, contrary to what the masters preached, neither made them inferior beings nor rendered them incapable of influencing the force in nature

for their own benefit. On the other hand, conjuration served as the least costly means, in physical terms, by which they could assert their power,” Roberts writes (102). Conjurers could not only heal sicknesses and injuries, but some could also work magic to influence the behavior of other individuals, sometimes even more powerful whites. Roberts writes that conjurers were “individuals whose knowledge and power emanated from a source outside the slave system, conjurers were sources of power and knowledge that could neither be controlled nor usurped by the masters” (94).

The power that we see Kimbrough and his music asserting over Palmer and other listeners who flock to the “shrine” of his club to partake in this spiritual experience is reminiscent of the conjurer badmen, who were revered for their ability to work occult magic on even white people. Kimbrough seems to be a benevolent conjurer, as the people who fall under his spell have positive spiritual experiences and come to respect his great musical powers. While conjurers would proclaim that they had special powers, sometimes using their knowledge of medicinal plants to heal illnesses and injuries and other times manipulating those around them with threats, Kimbrough does not claim to have any spiritual gifts, those around him say he does. Robert Johnson created a myth that forever linked him to the Devil, but here Junior Kimbrough is having these supernatural associations created for him.

It is easy to tell just by glancing at one of Kimbrough’s Fat Possum releases that he is a badman, someone you would think twice about crossing. On many of his album covers, Kimbrough is depicted looking mean and disheveled, with a cigarette dangling from lips.<sup>3</sup> Liner notes inform the listener that he fathered something like 36 children (*God Knows I Tried*), an almost superhuman feat of sexual virility. The album artwork and liner notes for Kimbrough’s

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<sup>3</sup> See *God Knows I Tried; Most Things Haven’t Worked Out; You Better Run*

Fat Possum releases present the bluesman as an outlaw, a loner disconnected from mainstream society who behaves however he wants and does not worry about the consequences because he sees suffering as universal. The notes to *God Knows I Tried* describe the area where Kimbrough was born and raised: “Junior Kimbrough wasn’t from the Delta but from the hills in Northeast Mississippi. The rural isolation of this hill country, like any frontier, has only one rule: you can do whatever you’re big enough to do. This rule applied to Hudsonville, Mississippi, Junior’s hometown, and he applied it to his music.” Here the hill country is described as being a frontier into the present day, and the outlaw mentality Kimbrough used to survive living there seeps into his music.

Anthony DeCurtis writes in the liner notes for *You Better Run: The Essential Junior Kimbrough*, “The blues in general is an ongoing document of life’s tribulations. But Junior’s music reaches into a darkness that goes well beyond the hazards of relationships, sexual rivalries or the vagaries of paychecks. In his music, the pain is existential; sad days lead inexorably to lonely nights and, finally, to the grave.” Kimbrough’s album titles suggest something of this nihilistic viewpoint, records with names like *God Knows I Tried*, *Most Things Haven’t Worked Out*, and *Sad Days Lonely Nights* show the perspective of a man who recognizes the futility in most human endeavors. It is a similar futility we see in the badman ballads, stories that convince the listener to care about a cold-blooded murderer, only to have him inevitably punished by white law and order by the end of the song. The artwork and liner notes of his Fat Possum releases show how Junior Kimbrough is kin to a badman folk hero like Great MacDaddy, a badman from a ballad collected by Roger Abrahams in the 1950s who is shot by police after escaping from jail to sing a last rhymed couplet before dying: “I’ve got a tombstone disposition, graveyard mind / I know I’m a bad motherfucker, that’s why I don’t mind dying” (Levine, 413).

While Junior Kimbrough, as evoked by Fat Possum, was stoic and brooding, R.L. Burnside was caricatured into a cartoon of mayhem and destruction. Fat Possum portrayed Burnside as a menacing character, someone who brought trouble and disorder wherever he went. In the liner notes to Burnside's record *Too Bad Jim*, Robert Palmer (who also produced the album) describes Burnside as a trickster figure who loved causing trouble during recording sessions. Palmer writes that, "R.L. has long been the kind of guy you'd expect to yell 'fire' in a crowded theater, just to see what would happen." Palmer describes how one of the best recording sessions came on a day that everything went wrong, and because Burnside "seemed to enjoy these incidents immensely, and by the time we'd cleared away the damage he was in an inspired mood, ready to rock."

Folklorists and literature scholars who study the black badman have identified the trickster tales told during slavery that were influenced by African folklore as part of the lineage of badman figures in African American culture. Roberts has argued that trickster tales helped enslaved Africans find "if not a solution to slavery as an institution, a system of values guiding action which greatly minimized its impact on their lives" (42). The trickster could be a dangerous figure, though, and so, "in creating their tales, enslaved Africans did attempt to infuse them with a moral and ethical code which would prevent the behaviors associated with the trickster from invading and destroying their own ranks" (45). The trickster needed constant moderation because he was selfish, "the trickster's world often appeared to be governed by an individual, secular ethos which envisioned all encounters in terms of a 'me' and 'them'" (45). Both animal and human trickster folk heroes emphasized "cleverness, guile, and wit as the most advantageous behavioral options for dealing with the power of the slavemasters in certain generic situations" (38). Tricksters used lies, word-play, and whites' belief in their inferiority to get away with

anything from stealing food to stowing away on a ship to throwing a party in the master's mansion while he is away. These characters would create chaotic or absurd disruptions to the established order to make trouble for the power structure that oppressed them.

Robert Palmer's liner notes for *Too Bad Jim* turn Burnside into one of these trickster characters, someone who looks to create chaos for his own personal gain and amusement. Jerry Bryant writes that the badman is "a creator of mayhem, a sower of disorder. He lives to 'break up the jamboree'" (1). The badman's favorite activities are "introducing disorder and arousing fear, disapproval, and alarm" (3). Levine also identifies an affinity for chaos in the black outlaw figure. "In his role as the solitary individual, the outlaw, black or white, symbolized antagonism toward the settled order. The outlaw was in constant conflict with and continually asserted his freedom from organized society" (417). This emphasis on "chaos," "disorder," and "mayhem" in the badman comes from the trickster tales told to help Africans survive enslavement in the Americas. Palmer's chaos theory of the blues, which he developed through his work at Fat Possum and will be analyzed more closely in later chapters, draws on these aspects of the black badman that he saw in Burnside.

One of James "T-Model" Ford's Fat Possum releases is simply titled *Bad Man*. Ford frowns out of a black-and-white photo on the album cover, a more serious portrayal than the jokester receives in much of the Fat Possum material in which he appears. The liner notes by producer Jim Dickinson tell us that, "James 'T-Model' Ford cannot read these notes. He has been shot, stabbed, and poisoned. His ankles wear the ragged scars of chain gang shackles. He learned the hard way...Not a relic of the past or a remnant of vanishing culture, T-Model Ford and [drummer] Spam are in the moment like few other blues artists. Out on the edge of the cliff where most fall to the rocks below, T-Model Ford takes off and flies—the existential hero." Fat

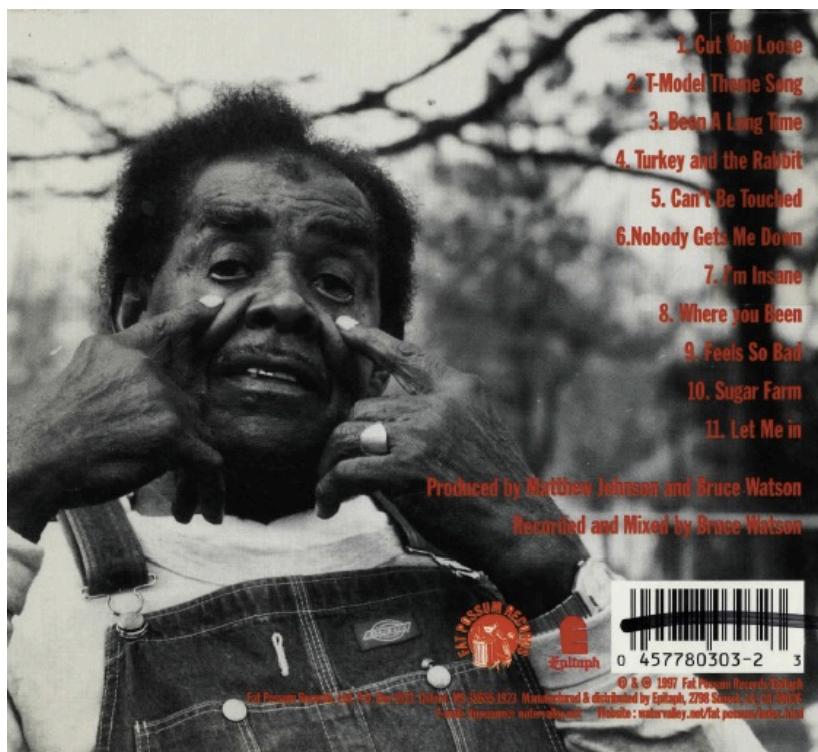
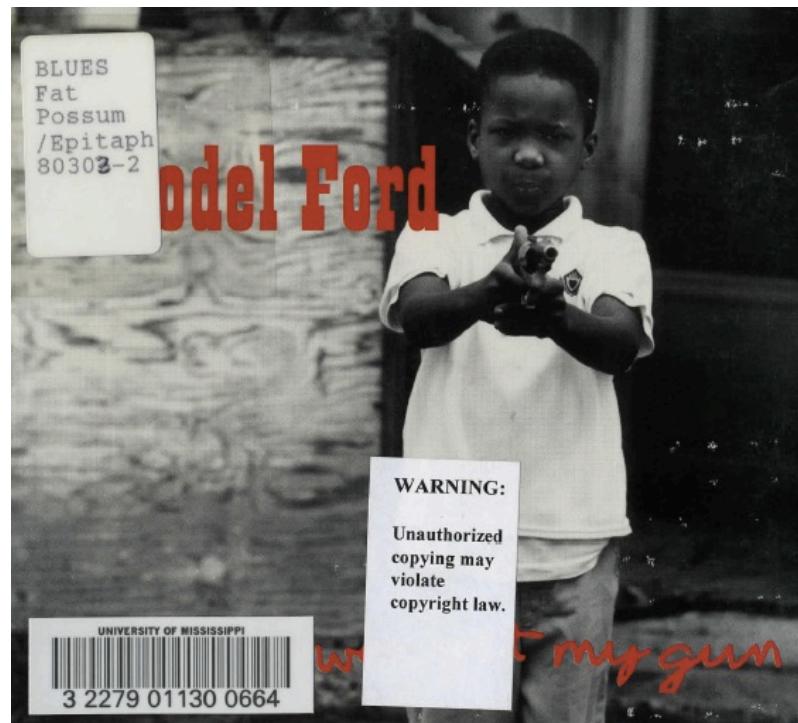


Figure 1. T-Model Ford, *Pee-Wee Get My Gun*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

Possum portrays Ford as a bad man who has faced horrific violence and hardship in his life, but

still manages to enact revenge when necessary, and even enjoys himself in his dystopic Mississippi Delta home of Greenville. “Not a relic of the past...[but] in the moment like few other blues artists” could be a mission statement of Fat Possum, and the label uses this black southern “existential hero” to achieve that vision.

All of Ford’s album titles sound like not-so-thinly veiled threats; *She Ain’t None of Your’n*, *Pee-Wee Get My Gun*, and *You Better Keep Still* round out his Fat Possum releases. The artwork for *Pee-Wee Get My Gun* portrays T-Model Ford as a violent hero able to survive and thrive in a violent world. The album’s cover is a black-and-white photograph of a young black boy pointing a handgun at the camera. On the back flap is Ford, making a frighteningly grotesque facial expression. Matthew Johnson’s liner notes paint a vivid southern gothic portrait of the Mississippi Delta where Ford lives. Ford and his drummer Spam become absurd heroes in this violent, strange world that “has got to be the worst place to live.” Ford is quoted boasting about his time spent in both jail and prison, saying “I could really stomp some ass back then, stomp it good. I was a-sure-enough dangerous man.” Johnson depicts Ford arguing with his girlfriend Stella over how many times he has been to jail, until he reveals that he really cannot remember. Ford and Spam are so tough that they are the only people left willing to brave the frontier of their environment. “T-Model and Spam are the only ones still playing on Greenville’s Nelson Street,” Johnson tells the listener. “Most of the audience has scattered due to the violence from the crack trade.” Ford survives, though, because he is badder than the environment in which he lives. At the end of a night of playing on Nelson Street for up to eight hours, Ford “will coat himself with Outdoorsman Off and climb into his van to crash,” the untouchable badman hero who can sleep outdoors in a neighborhood where many people are too afraid to live.

Cedell Davis was recruited to Fat Possum by Robert Palmer, who had played with the unique slide guitarist in Arkansas in the early 1980s. Davis's life story alone makes him kin to one of the exaggerated heroes from the folk tales compiled by Levine, without much exaggeration necessary. One wonders if Davis had superhuman abilities to survive both a childhood bout of polio and being trampled nearly to death during a police raid at a club in St. Louis. After he recovered from polio at the age of ten, Davis had to relearn how to play guitar with limited use of his hands. He switched the dominant hand, and came up with the idea that would create his signature sound; though he no longer had the dexterity in his hands to play chords or slide in the traditional way, by clutching a butter knife and sliding it up and down the fret board Davis could play slide guitar, creating tones that sounded like no other bluesman. He could still walk with the help of crutches after recovering from polio, but during the stampede at the club in St. Louis his legs were broken in multiple places, confining him to a wheelchair for the remainder of his life.

In *Seems Like Murder Here*, Gussow describes how intraracial violence is an inherent aspect of juke joint culture; it is not just an unfortunate aberration, but can be a thrill for participants and part of the point. While Davis may seem to be no longer strong and dangerous like the other Fat Possum bluesmen, his injuries show that he is capable of surviving great acts of violence. "Cutting and shooting, the pragmatic jook violences, were aids in the attainment of sexual pleasure, instruments for the communication of sexual jealousy and other strong feeling, occasions for the demonstration of physical prowess, markers (as survivor's scars) of unkillability, *post facto* occasions for the making of legends," Gussow writes (208-9). Davis' disabilities are like juke joint scars, marking him 'unkillable,' as clearly multiple people and traumas have already attempted and failed at ending his life.

Davis's guitar playing takes some time to get used to, and some will never enjoy the harsh dissonance he creates using his signature alternate tunings. In the liner notes to *Feel Like Doin' Something Wrong*, Palmer calls it "a guitar style that is utterly unique, in or out of the blues," and it seems to speak to Davis's personal tragedies and ability to survive any hardship the universe can throw at him. Davis's ability to persevere and continue playing music through the tragedies he suffered makes him a larger-than-life figure like the exaggerated heroes from black ballads. Fat Possum emphasizes his badman qualities by re-telling Davis's incredible biography in liner notes, *Darker Blues*, and the documentary on the label. Davis's almost supernatural ability to survive nearly any hardship has transformed him into a fearless performer, someone Palmer says is willing to play "in some of the world's most dangerous dives." As with T-Model Ford, Cedell Davis is portrayed as a man so bad that he can withstand the violent world in which he lives without suffering ill effects; his badness offers magical protection. "Somehow he learned to project a kind of presence that diffuses violence," Palmer writes, "keeping him miraculously whole even amid raging chaos. There is something Buddha-like about that presence, a sense of having learned to deal with a physically violent world *with his mind*."

The imagery and titles of Davis's Fat Possum releases also perpetuate a badman image. His two Fat Possum records, not including his *Best of* release, are titled *Feel Like Doin' Something Wrong* and *The Horror of It All*. The former portrays Davis as capable of inflicting retributive violence on a world that has certainly wronged him, and the latter is in line with the existentialist moods of Junior Kimbrough, reflecting on the atrocities of a cruel, unforgiving universe that the viewer can see clearly written on Davis's body. The photography used for the album artwork emphasizes Davis's body in the mode of a Southern gothic horror. The fonts chosen for both albums are in the style of horror-movie posters, and the colors black and red are

used to invoke a bloody murder scene in a dark, scary film. On *The Horror of It All*, there are photographs of Davis's empty wheelchair on the back cover of the album and on the CD itself to remind the viewer of Davis's disability and to cause disturbing cognitive dissonance—if the wheelchair is empty, where is Davis? On *Feel Like Doin' Something Wrong*, the emphasis is instead placed on Davis's disabled hands. The black-and-white photographs reveal their limited mobility as he clutches his knife to slide it across his guitar's strings. Though it is just a butter knife, the presence of a knife in his hand makes a connection to the razor-toting, violent badmen from the exaggeration tales and ballads. These dehumanizing images of Davis's disability turn



Figure 2. Cedell Davis, *The Horror of It All*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

him into a both a Southern gothic monster and a badman with the supernatural power to live through almost any act of violence the universe can muster.

One of the most unique aspects of Fat Possum as a blues label was its use of rap-influenced imagery and production techniques. Embracing rap rather than repudiating the use of electronic sounds made Fat Possum forward-thinking instead of clinging to a pre-digital past. While many blues fans in the 1990s were at the least taken aback by rap's obscenity and its loud, electronic beats, Fat Possum rightly recognized the many connections between rap and blues. Fat Possum would often call in producers to remix songs by its bluesmen, using beats and sampled sounds to create some of its most successful tracks, including R.L. Burnside's "It's Bad You Know" from *Come On In*, which gained attention from being featured in *The Sopranos*. The cover of the compilation *Not the Same Old Blues Crap Vol. 3* is a photograph of a dumpster outside an ugly brick building, spray-painted with the message "I love you bitch," an urban scene that would be at home on the cover of a rap album. Fat Possum even released a rap compilation featuring a mash-up between southern rappers and producers and songs by its blues artists. Called *New Beats from the Delta*, the 2000 release took songs by Kimbrough, Ford, Asie Payton, and other Fat Possum artists and featured rappers rhyming over remixed versions of the blues. The album cover looks like a rap compilation one would pick up from a gas station, and the liner notes instruct listeners which albums to check out by the bluesmen if they like what they hear.

A compilation like *New Beats from the Delta* as well as the successful remixes of blues songs by R.L. Burnside and others shows that Fat Possum actively made connections between rap and blues, and hoped that music fans would recognize these parallels as well. Many music scholars have written about the shared heritage of rap and blues music. Scholar Tricia Rose writes in her pioneering study of rap that, “The coded familiarity of the rhythms and hooks that rap samples from other black music, especially funk and soul music, carries with it the power of black collective memory” (138). Sociologist Zandria Robinson writes about the southern heritage rap music has due to its roots in the blues and other southern black musics. “Because of the commonality of some black cultural tropes, like call-and-response and some cadences and



Figure 3. Various Artists, *Not the Same Old Blues Crap 3*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

rhythm patterns, hip-hop on the East and West Coasts had incorporated racial traditions into the music that southerners implicitly and explicitly claimed as regional property” (66). Robinson explores how in the work of southern hip-hop artists and films about the southern rap scene, “the connection between hip-hop and the blues is made plain, and the South is privileged as the place ‘where it all began’” (73). Colleen Ali Neff’s ethnography of the hip-hop scene in Clarksdale, Mississippi troubles the boundary between blues and rap as the young hip-hop artists in the town often branded “the birthplace of the blues” see their music as an evolution of the blues played by earlier generations.

Despite this shared lineage being pointed out by historians, cultural critics, and artists, the stereotypical fan base for these two genres could not be more different, and usually are not viewed as being willing to give the other genre a listen.<sup>4</sup> In her ethnography, Neff gives an anecdote in which a pair of blues tourists misidentify her as a fellow visitor (she lived and worked in Clarksdale for several years while doing research). When Neff tells them she is making a documentary about local rap artists, she gets the following response: “‘Oh!’ said the shaggy white-haired Floridian. ‘You won’t find any hip-hop here.’ His shirt was covered in patches from commercial blues festivals across the South and Midwest. ‘That’s right,’ said his wife, her swingy ponytail bouncing. ‘Not one iota. This is a blues town.’ ‘People are blues-oriented in this town,’ he reiterated, slightly hurt, almost as if I had slapped him in the face” (75). Fat Possum was taking a chance with a marketing approach that brought rap and blues together, and the label used the black badman in its attempt to convince rap fans that its blues was not so far removed from the rap they encountered.

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<sup>4</sup> The biggest exception to the stereotype that only white people listen to blues is the soul-blues genre, which sees African American women as its biggest fan base.



Figure 4. Various Artists, *New Beats From the Delta*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

One of the biggest connections between rap and blues is the way in which the exaggerated black badman is featured as the narrator/performer. Boasting has existed in African American oral tradition since slavery, and rap and blues both feature boasting rhymes. One of the vernacular oral rhyming traditions that has linked blues and rap are the family-shaming street rhymes known as the dozens. In the preface to his book on the dozens, Elijah Wald writes that his entire study came out of research he was doing “exploring the connections between blues and hip-hop” (vii). In playing the dozens, two opponents insult each other and their families in often, but not always, rhymed jokes until one gives up, or they become so enraged that a physical altercation begins. Each narrator exaggerates his own abilities, as well as the opponent’s faults.

Similar word-play rituals have been linked to slave traditions and to Africa. “Hyperbole is the essence of any boasting tradition, and rap both early and late takes its place in the honored tradition that can be traced back to Elephant, Lion, and Bear in the slave tales” (Bryant, 157). Often brags center on the narrator’s strength and sexual performance, while insults are targeted towards the alleged promiscuity of the opponent’s family, especially the mother. Fat Possum uses similar joking sexualized boasts in its rhetoric, titling its compilations *Not the Same Old Blues Crap* and printing the phrase “Music So Strong It’ll Pull the Panties Off a Nun” on the CD of *Vol. 1* of that compilation. In the liner notes for that album, Johnson writes, “My momma says it’s ok to generalize a little. First, Fat Possum is not like any other blues label. Second, there are only two kinds of blues records made today: Fat Possum Records, which don’t suck, and all the others.” Johnson is not playing the dozens here, but he is insulting all other blues records being made at that moment and exalting his own at the same time, another example of what Gussow has called “a multi-sourced, all-American tradition of vernacular self-aggrandizement” (“Chicken With the Train,” 59).

Levine documents how self-centered brags and tales developed in the early 1900s, as the focus shifted from animal trickster tales to stories about the individual self. It is clear how the imagery in these tales and rhymes has influenced African American music from blues to rap. Willie George King of Louisiana sent these hand-written lyrics to Alan Lomax in the 1920s:

There is nothing in the jungle any bader than me.  
I am the badest woman ever come out Tenisee;  
I sleep with a panther till the break of day;  
I caught a tiger-cat in the collar and i ask him what he had to say;  
And i wore a rattlesnake for my chain;  
And a Negro man for my fob,... (Levine, 402)

In another tale, a black man named Old Pete is described as having a head so thick it can be run over by a train without hurting him, the ability to saddle an alligator and ride it to another

city, and having sired 56 children. High John de Conqueror “eloped with the Devil’s daughter,” then upon meeting his father-in-law, tore off the Devil’s arm and beat him with it. “Before he left Hell he passed out ice water to everyone and turned the dampers down so that when he returned to visit his in-laws the place wouldn’t be so hot” (403). Often these tales would take the form of rhymes, where their connection to rap becomes more obvious. When John Lomax went to visit Willie George King, she told him this rhymed tale of her upbringing, “Borned by a p’ckly pear / Suckled by a grizzly bear, / Rocked in a cradle with butcher knives...” (402).

Throughout this paper I have been referring to the *badman* tradition in African American folklore and discussing the way Fat Possum invoked this tradition in marketing its *bluesmen*. Fat Possum never signed any female blues artists. This was not because there were not or are not women participating in the hill country blues scene the label mined for talent during the time period it was recording contemporary blues. Hill country blues is characterized by large musical families that pass musical traditions down through generations. Women like Jessie Mae Hemphill, Rosa Lee Hill, Bernice Turner, and Sharde Thomas have always been a part of these families and have played a crucial role in maintaining and developing hill country blues traditions. In African American folklore alongside the black badman developed black badwomen characters, fictional and real. They are found cutting, shooting, laughing, and killing in folk tales, ballads, toasts, and blues. Willie George King sounds like one, as was Bessie Smith, and the women of the juke joints in Polk County, Florida studied by Zora Neale Hurston. Hill country blueswoman Jessie Mae Hemphill certainly seems like a badwoman with her wild cowgirl outfits, gold teeth, and adamant refusal to remarry after her first husband treated her poorly when she was young (Mitchell, 79-81). Hemphill was never recorded by Fat Possum, but her hill country pedigree (granddaughter of legendary fife and drum leader Sid Hemphill) and

iconoclastic persona seem like they would have made her a perfect fit for the label, although she did suffer a stroke in 1993 that took many years to recover from (she never did regain the ability to play guitar).<sup>5</sup> Robert Palmer was aware of Hemphill, as she appeared in the documentary *Deep Blues*, but she never recorded for Fat Possum.

Women were rarely present in the blues world Fat Possum constructed for its audiences. Throughout the documentary *You See Me Laughin'*, women are only shown as supportive family members, voiceless juke joint patrons that serve merely as scenery, or bad memories that gave the male artists the blues. For example, T-Model Ford describes how he did not begin playing guitar until he was 58-years-old after his wife left him and he felt compelled to do so; he got the blues and had to find a way to express them. Ford narrates his blues conversion experience in the documentary: "My wife left me then. That night, and I walked out there, moon shining...I looked up at that moon this way. I say, 'Lord I guess,' she done run off so many times, and I say, 'Lord I guess this is it.' I went on...got my chair, and I reached and got my guitar. And I sit down there by that heater. And I looked back over there in that bed at that guitar. I said, 'I'm gonna play this motherfucker.'" Another memorable moment in the documentary is when Junior Kimbrough's longtime partner Mildred Washington is questioned about Kimbrough's well-known infidelity, which has produced dozens of children. "You was asking me now how I felt if he was with other womens. It was fine with me. Because I knew that he loved me and I knew that I loved him," she says, her comment couched in a discussion of the sensual nature of Kimbrough's music.

These are the opposite of the women written about by William Ferris who participated in singing and "blues talk" at house parties, contributing to the music with their jokes, dozens, and asides almost as much as the musicians themselves (Ferris, 107). Ferris' blueswomen were active

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<sup>5</sup> Jessie Mae Hemphill Blues Trail Marker, Senatobia, Mississippi. <http://msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/jessie-mae-hemphill>

participants. The women who surrounded Fat Possum's bluesmen were out-of-focus, occasionally popping up on the periphery but mostly absent. Women rarely appear in the art or liner notes for the albums, either. An exception is the nameless girlfriend of T-Model Ford's drummer Spam. Matthew Johnson writes in the liner notes to *Pee-Wee Get My Gun*: "Spam's girlfriend walked out the door dragging an oxygen tank and holding a cigarette in her other hand—a situation that could have easily blown out her rib cage if not the entire block. Spam didn't care about that though. He was worried she might snip off the tips of his fingers with a box cutter again." This is a badwoman so bad that even Matthew Johnson noticed her. Not very many women fare so well, as this is one of the few places we see a female presence in Fat Possum's narrative.

One cannot study or hang out with badmen without running into badwomen as well. Matthew Johnson eventually crossed paths with Spam's girlfriend, and both Lawrence Levine and Alan Lomax found Willie George King. Badwomen have been a part of blues since the beginnings of the genre. The blueswomen of the 1920s who popularized blues during the race records boom were bad in many of the ways adopted by later bluesmen. Angela Y. Davis has argued that witnessing these bad blueswomen in performances helped working-class black women attain an early version of feminist consciousness raising that allowed them to see themselves as capable and worthy of the same things the blueswomen were. Davis's study *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* revises the history of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey's work to show that they and their working-class black female fans were strong, independent, sexual, and sometimes violent and bad, embracing all that emancipation had to offer while white America instated Jim Crow oppression. Blueswomen could be bad by being violent and sexual, and they did both of these things on their own terms as, "[t]hese rowdy and hardened women are not

simply female incarnations of stereotypical male aggressiveness” (36). Davis writes that, “This rough-and-tumble, sexually aware woman is capable of issuing intimidating threats to men who have mistreated her, and she is more than willing to follow through on them” (37). Outside of the songs, singers often lived up to their badwoman personas. Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were famously bisexual or queer women who had multiple relationships outside of their marriages and were known for being the life of a party. Davis also provides an often-repeated anecdote in which the fearless Smith once chased the Ku Klux Klan away from a tent show performance (37).

The first blues ever recorded by an African American singer comes from a badwoman’s perspective. Mamie Smith’s 1920 recording of “Crazy Blues” was a best seller and famously started the race records boom. In his book *Seems Like Murder Here*, blues scholar Adam Gussow has teased out the importance of a couple lines buried within the last verse of the song, “I’m gonna do like a Chinaman / Go and get some hop / Get myself a gun / And shoot myself a cop.” Gussow writes that these lines were influenced by “the black folk tradition of ‘badman’ heroism” in part because the black urban areas where the record was most popular were filled with black southerners who had streamed north during the Great Migration, southerners “for whom such folk figures lived as mythic archetypes, sources of usable power, aids in identity formation” (162-3). Here is a female antecedent to Fat Possum’s bluesmen, a blueswoman borrowing from the badman folk tradition and selling it to an audience who would find this outlaw behavior appealing. “Mingling romantic and political frustration, ‘Crazy Blues’ reconfigures the badman tradition as a badwoman tradition, a lyric discourse of gun-, knife-, and dynamite-inflicted vengeance against black lovers and white oppressors...” (164). Smith became “the first black woman to record a secular song for commercial consumption,” sold maybe a million copies of

that song, and started America's craze for blues and race records that would continue until the Great Depression halted the fledgling industry (160).

It is easy to see how "Crazy Blues" influenced everything from NWA and Ice-T to Gil Scott Heron and continues to be timely in our moment of Black Lives Matter. Badwomen characters have occupied a space in this folkloric tradition that I have been tracing equally as long as badmen have. As Neff points out in her ethnography, "A century of (usually white) male ethnographers in the world of black speech and music has focused on the work of male masters of words and contributed to the popular perception that women are only marginally involved in the world of oral/musical improvisation," the world that has created these badman/woman characters (129-30). Fat Possum never signed a female blues artist, but that does not mean there were not bad blueswomen in 1990s Mississippi.

Robert Palmer gives a revealing anecdote about the Delta bluesman Son House in his classic blues study *Deep Blues*: "In 1928 House shot and killed a man at a drunken house party near Lyon, and although he pleaded self-defense, he was sent to the state penal farm at Parchman. He'd always been rebellious—he once told an interviewer how he spent afternoons in a Clarksdale movie theater when he was a teenager, watching westerns and quietly but fervently hoping the outlaws would win" (82). Here we see together the blues badman and the outlaw of the Western frontier, how the violent badman rides through our culture and adapts to fascinate Americans at every historical moment since "Puritans came to define their relationship to the New World in terms of violence and warfare" (Slotkin, 56).

Fat Possum was smart to choose the badman as a marketing strategy for its bluesmen. Though R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, T-Model Ford, Cedell Davis, and the other bluesmen on the label did embody characteristics of the badman in their lives, Fat Possum amplified these

experiences and personalities to create caricatures of the black badman to sell its artists. These exaggerations helped draw connections to blues badmen of the past and rap stars of the 1990s, which made Fat Possum's artists appeal to a wide audience, including blues fans and younger music fans unfamiliar with the genre. The badman has resonance with both black and white audiences, as Europeans and enslaved Africans developed folklore around badman characters since first arriving in the Americas. Bryant has argued that outlaws in particular "can be a source of nourishment and liberation for the African American community, leading the more timid into new modes of consciousness, toward otherwise inconceivable choices and identities" (180). The black badman "becomes an important aspect of identity in the cultural code of an ostracized race, a way of thumbing one's nose at the values of the powerful" (180). Rebellion is a positive, liberating prospect for an oppressed group to imagine, so the plethora of black badmen that have manifested in African American folklore and pop culture should be no surprise, nor should we expect to see this character disappear.

The problematic aspect of Fat Possum's marketing is who is doing the storytelling. When black badmen are presented by a white mediator rather than black artists, the character becomes a stereotype of the violent black male rather than a rebel figure who provides liberating catharsis for black audiences. The stereotype of the violent black man has been serving the needs of white supremacy in America since the end of slavery. Anxiety surrounding the idea of the violent black male continues to manifest itself in racist violence on an interpersonal level and via the state daily. Roberts writes that the black badman hero is dangerous for black communities regardless of who is doing the telling, because "in American society, African Americans have had to struggle continually against a more insidious manifestation of the 'bad nigger'—the image in the white mind that every black person is a potential 'bad nigger'" (215). Additionally, it is worth

remembering that the black badmen from ballads and toasts are always punished for acting out their rebellion. No matter how satisfying it may be to see Stagger Lee or Railroad Bill gun down countless individuals over something as petty as a Stetson hat, the narrator punishes the hero, as “[t]o be a black badman is in itself a crime, and its punishment inescapable” (Bryant, 17). While the black badman may offer temporary catharsis, punishment for his rebellion will come. When Fat Possum places its bluesmen in this role, it is dooming them.

## CHAPTER 2

### SELLING SOUTHERN BLACK MASCULINITY AT FAT POSSUM RECORDS

The cover of hill country bluesman R.L. Burnside's 1996 Fat Possum release *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey* depicts the aging black musician as a caricature of the mythological figure that has been used to uphold the southern rape complex. This stereotype has been employed in cultural productions from minstrelsy to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* to gangsta rap.<sup>6</sup> The cartoon portrays Burnside as a southern gothic monster birthed from the imagination of a white supremacist: a sexually depraved, violent black male, ready to pounce on two young white women. The twin women are equally cartoonish visions of white trash jailbait, their posteriors and the requisite ass pockets of whiskey more meaningful than their faces, which are concealed by cascading blonde hair that emphasizes their whiteness. Burnside—dressed in a ‘wife beater’—has removed his belt in a gesture that signifies the sex and violence to come.

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<sup>6</sup> LaGrone, Kheven Lee. “From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The ‘Nigger’ As Commodity for Popular American Entertainment.”

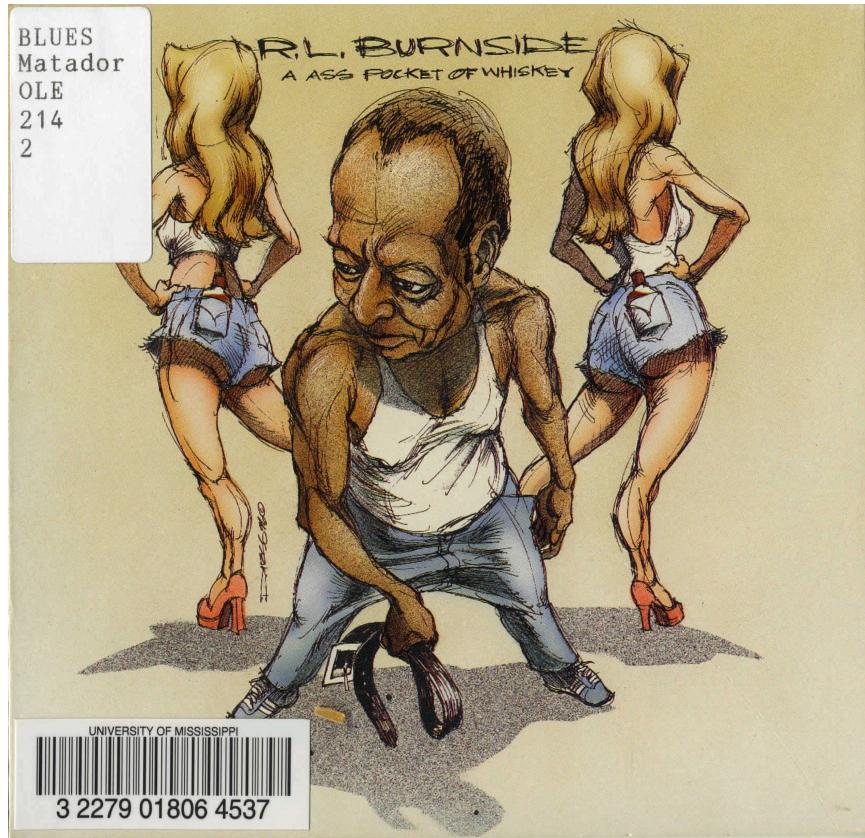


Figure 5. R.L. Burnside, *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*. University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

This image is so purposefully politically incorrect, so off-putting, it tells the consumer that what lies within is not your average blues record, or as Fat Possum would say “Not the Same Old Blues Crap.” *Living Blues* magazine wrote that *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*, “may well be the worst blues album ever made,” and Fat Possum likely took that as a compliment (DeKoster). The music on the record was recorded in one drunken afternoon in Holly Springs, Mississippi and seemed almost designed to offend blues purists. “From a strictly musical perspective this collaboration worked better than one might expect given the vast differences of race, class, and generation between the parties involved,” writes Ryan Moore of the album, “but it still perpetuated the enduring caricature of the southern bluesman as drunken amoral misogynist. And yet it was as if the heavy dose of self-conscious irony gave them license to revisit the cultural minefield where intellectual white kids play the blues with black

southerners, at least as long as they were the first to call attention to the game they were playing (in one snippet of mid-song banter, for example, Spencer asks to borrow some money and Burnside threatens to kick his ass)” (Moore, 182). The music and conversation between songs functioned the same way the drawing on the album cover did. Fat Possum used the record to scream its ‘edgy’ brand at the top of its lungs, while hoping to convert alternative rock fans of the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion to actual blues music by portraying Burnside as a badman fans of punk rock should recognize as a forefather.

The collaboration between Burnside and Jon Spencer’s Blues Explosion helped put the small Oxford, Mississippi-based record label on the map, drawing attention to the label’s iconoclastic proprietor Matthew Johnson and his searches amidst rural juke joints for the last of Mississippi’s bluesmen. R.L. Burnside, who was known in blues circles but not widely celebrated before he recorded on Fat Possum, was the first bluesman Matthew Johnson recorded and became the most famous and successful of Fat Possum’s artists. The model of black masculinity Fat Possum used to represent R.L. Burnside was applied to its other blues artists including Junior Kimbrough, T-Model Ford, and Cedell Davis, and I will refer to this as a blues masculinity. I argue that this blues masculinity includes several major characteristics that are leveraged to create a badman image in order to appeal to fans of punk, grunge, rap, and alternative music. These fans were encouraged to view the Fat Possum bluesmen as the original “badmen” who lay the foundations or roots for the rock and rap artists they loved. Invoking the black badman also served to make connections between Fat Possum’s artists and iconic figures from African American folklore and pop culture, as well as blues history.

By engaging the badman trope, Fat Possum’s bluesmen exhibited markers of authenticity for multiple communities. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the badman or outlaw figure is a

powerful character in American culture across race, class, and generation. Fat Possum's version of the blues badman is specific to the rural context in which most of its artists lived, which is important for understanding how the stereotypes the label uses have operated in American culture and work to oppress southern black men. An examination of the blues masculinity Fat Possum used to stereotype and categorize its artists through close readings of album artwork, liner notes, and other promotional materials reveals the similarities between Fat Possum's work and the way bluesmen have been subject to oppressive stereotypes throughout the genre's history, as the artists are silenced and not allowed to interpret their own art for their audiences.

Before breaking down the various traits that characterize the blues masculinity, it is worth noting the exceptions to the rule. The rural context of Fat Possum's artists is particularly important for understanding the stereotypes invoked by the label in its marketing. Urban bluesmen have certainly suffered their own misrepresentations, but they are less likely to fall into the version of masculinity that I explore in this paper. Many urban bluesmen have preferred to exhibit a more sophisticated, suave masculinity with a reduced emphasis on violence and a greater emphasis on sex and love. In sociologist Charles Keil's study of the Chicago blues scene in the 1960s, he writes that some of the trends subscribed to by the bluesmen in that scene were considered to be effeminate by mainstream culture and some researchers, but they were thought of as highly masculine and attractive in their own community. The urban Chicago bluesmen studied by Keil spent much time processing their hair and would sing in falsetto, traits that caused a folklorist to describe them as "dandy." "Prettiness (wavy hair, manicured nails, frilly shirts, flashy jackets) plus strength, tender but tough—this is the style that many Negro women find irresistible," Keil writes (27). Keil describes Bobby "Blue" Bland as "naïve," "childish," "in control," "well-groomed," "reliable," and "gentle," words that are the complete opposite of Fat

Possum's representations of its artists (114). Keil points out that the thriving urban blues scene in Chicago was being ignored by the blues scholars he refers to as "moldy figs" because these urban bluesmen were exhibiting different masculine traits than the country bluesmen favored by white audiences (34).

B.B. King also addresses confronting stereotypes about blues musicians in his autobiography in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

I wanted to be cool. I was a kid from the country trying to lose the stink of manure. I didn't look like a star. In fact, I never would. Even today I'll walk down the street and get lost in the crowd. But back then I was determined to follow those entertainers who'd developed a sense of style and dignity. Being a bluesman carried a stigma, both from blacks and whites. I fear that's true even today. A bluesman is supposed to be some guy slouched on a stool, a cigarette hanging from his lips, his cap falling off his head, his overalls ripped and smelly, a jug of corn liquor by his side. He talks lousy English and can't carry on a conversation without cussin' every other word. Ask him about his love life and he'll tell you he just beat up his old lady. Give him a dollar and he'll sing something dirty. He's a combination clown and fool. No one respects him or pays him mind. I resented that. Still do. (126-7)

Throughout his autobiography King expresses frustration with the stereotypes about blues musicians that Fat Possum has used to market its music. King emphasizes his efforts to dress well, speak intelligently, and represent the blues as an art form that could someday be taken as seriously as jazz or classical music. King is a Mississippi Delta native, but he became a famous bluesman after moving to Memphis and participating in the urban blues scene on that city's legendary Beale Street. King describes throughout his autobiography his desire to distance himself from his rural, country background in order to be taken seriously as a performer and bring the blues the respect he believes it deserves. The masculinity adopted by King as an urban bluesmen is far from the country badman persona that Fat Possum uses to market its bluesmen, a stereotype King would like to see eradicated from the genre.

Sociologist David Grazian found a similar masculinity to the one described by Keil being represented in the more contemporary Chicago blues scene of the 1990s. In his research at various blues clubs around Chicago, Grazian found that the urban bluesmen often used a gender performance that accentuated their ability to be a competent heterosexual lover, emphasizing fine clothing, money, and playing with stereotypes about the hypersexual black male. “[L]ocal black artists present racially suggestive stock characters reminiscent of minstrel performances of yesteryear in exchange for abundant cheers and applause from their predominantly white audiences... For instance, young black musicians commonly maintain stage personae commensurate with the imagined lifestyle of the hypersexed traveling showman who cannot help but succumb to the pleasures of drink, women, and song” (44).

Urban bluesmen constructed themselves as hip, well-dressed ladies’ men, a different set of stereotypes from the ones being tackled in this paper. As Grazian’s findings point out, the stereotypes for both urban and rural bluesmen are created by white expectations and result in the loss of artists’ autonomy and the perpetuation of false narratives created by the stereotypes (i.e. black men are hypersexual). The divide between country and city plays a key role in identity formation in the black community, so it is unsurprising that bluesmen from rural and urban locations would exhibit different gender performances.<sup>7</sup> Thus, as I explore the traits that compose what I refer to as the blues masculinity utilized by Fat Possum to market its artists, it is important to note that while this masculine type has appeared in the blues throughout the genre’s history, this gender performance often looks different among urban bluesmen.

The blues masculinity includes several key traits that have appeared in various combinations among some of the most famous bluesmen, traits that have been fetishized by the

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<sup>7</sup> See Robinson, Zandria F. *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

white blues fans and scholars Keil referred to as “moldy figs,” and that have been picked up by Fat Possum in the label’s marketing strategies. Violence is the most prominent theme attached to the blues masculinity, but several other characteristics come to light when examining this figure. Sexual degeneracy, drunkenness, a rural location, and poverty are other characteristics of the blues musicians on Fat Possum emphasized by the label. This marketing tactic was informed by the time period when Fat Possum debuted in the early 1990s, a time when grunge and rap were two of the most popular new genres in the musical landscape. Casting hill country blues artists as the musicians who laid the ground for these two genres was key for Fat Possum gaining a new, young audience during this cultural moment.

This narrative repeats several themes that have been in operation in the blues for much of the genre’s history. The 1960s blues revival pointed out how rock and roll could not exist without the blues, making a case that the blues should be appreciated for that fact.<sup>8</sup> The badman has been a central part of the genre since it began, as explored in Chapter 1. Fat Possum took these two narratives, combined them, and updated them for its present moment, pointing out to young fans of grunge and rap that their music would not exist without the feral, deranged bluesmen Matthew Johnson found playing in the few remaining rural juke joints of 1990s Mississippi. Fat Possum used a blues masculinity to tell young music fans that this blues laid the musical roots, the foundations of the ethos, and a blueprint for the personalities of grunge and rap’s most beloved figures.

Kheven Lee LaGrone points out that stereotypes about black men have been used to entertain white audiences since the days of minstrelsy. LaGrone refers to these stereotypical depictions of black men as a “Nigger” character or fantasy. “[W]hite men’s notions of the darky,

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<sup>8</sup> Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 217-53

or ‘Nigger’” (118) have been invoked in popular culture to sell cultural productions to white audiences, and culture makers have certainly realized “the popularity and profitability of the ‘Nigger’” (129). LaGrone writes that “minstrelsy projected Blacks as rowdy, stupid, infantile, lazy, dirty, undisciplined, drunken, and sexually promiscuous,” the same stereotype we see in Fat Possum’s images of its blues artists (122). The reason this character has become so popular in American entertainment for such a long time, from the days of minstrelsy to the rise of gangsta rap, is its reinforcement of white supremacy through gazing at what “embodied the un-American, undesirable ‘other’” (124).

Social theory has explored the desire of humans to gaze upon an “undesirable ‘other.’” Work on abjection by Julia Kristeva and an anthropological investigation of pollution by Mary Douglas illustrate that the abject or impure is often an object of voyeurism. Douglas considers the cultural relativity of dirt and pollution, showing how the impure is socially constructed by different groups, and especially religions. She writes that, “it is not always an unpleasant experience to confront ambiguity. Obviously it is more tolerable in some areas than in others. There is a whole gradient on which laughter, revulsion, and shock belong at different points and intensities. The experience can be stimulating” (46). To Douglas, dirt or the impure are “matter out of place” within an orderly system of categorization (44). Social groups invent endless rituals relating to pollution and dirt, and generally societies are obsessed by the task of managing the impure. This relates to LaGrone’s discussion of the black male “Nigger” character as an “other,” and affects the bluesmen on Fat Possum in particular due to their rural, impoverished, southern location. Not only are stereotypes created to manage anxiety around the “other” that is the southern rural black male, but a “stimulating” experience of voyeurism can result from gazing at this figure.

Kristeva also analyzed this dynamic in the context of social theory and psychoanalysis rather than anthropology. For her the abject “is thus not lack of cleanliness or health...but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The idea of the primitive relates to abjection, as societies reject that which they view as primitive traits. “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animals*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (12-3). This statement does not only relate to what Kristeva calls “primitive societies,” but is easily transferred into an American context, in which black males are viewed as animalistic brutes who lack self control and are characterized as “representatives of sex and murder.”

Kristeva, like Douglas, identifies how gazing upon the impure or abject can be thrilling for the viewer. Using the example of watching a fire at night, Kristeva writes that the sensation can “produce in the spectator... a certain shock to the brain and, as it were, a challenge to his own destructive instincts, which, alas, lie buried in the soul of even the meekest and most domesticated official of the lowest grade. This grim sensation is almost always delightful” (18). The abject and the impure are ripe for voyeurism, and Kristeva recognizes “the power of fascination exerted upon us, openly or secretly, by that field of horror” (208). Kristeva and Douglas’s theories reveal the embedded nature of gazing upon abject, impure “others.”

This idea of an abject or impure “other” has been at work in folk and roots music since the beginning of the twentieth century. Benjamin Filene examined the work of early folklorists and song collectors, and discovered a revealing quote from the English folklorist Cecil Sharp.

Sharp took his first song-collecting trip to Appalachia in 1916 to see if British ballads were in fact being sung by the folk in America. While out with the folk, he directly tied “dirt” to musical authenticity. “It is sad that cleanliness and good music, or good taste in music, rarely go together. Dirt and good music are the usual bed-fellows...” he wrote (quoted in Filene, 26). The southern black men who make blues music are thus not only occupying an abject identity, but they are also only able to be seen as authentic or “good” if their dirtiness and abjection are plainly visible. Fat Possum capitalized on this dynamic by selling its blues artists as abject figures worthy of a fascinated, voyeuristic gaze through utilizing stereotypes about black men, southernness, and poverty.

The prison plays a key role in Fat Possum’s marketing, and helps the label emphasize its artists’ violent pasts. Liner notes and journalism articles on the label and its artists often reference the fact that several of Fat Possum’s bluesmen have been to prison, with Burnside and T-Model Ford having spent time at Mississippi’s notorious Parchman Farm for murder. Burnside and Ford are encouraged to retell their murder stories as a measure of their credibility as blues musicians. The story of the murder Burnside committed, which he claims was self-defense even though the victim was shot in the back, is repeated in the 2002 documentary on the label and its artists *You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen* as well as numerous articles on Burnside and Fat Possum (McInerney, Grant). T-Model Ford says of the murder he committed in the liner notes to *Pee-Wee Get My Gun*, “I could really stomp some ass back then, stomp it good. I was a sure-enough dangerous man.” Johnson writes in those same liner notes that Ford’s “credentials as a bluesman are impeccable, if anything the man’s overqualified.” The qualifications Johnson discusses are Ford’s background of plowing by mule, the fact that he’s illiterate and does not know how old he is, and that he has served time in prison.

Fat Possum's badman archetype has similarities to and differences from previous badman figures that have been seen in blues music history. Violence is the most prominent theme romanticized by the label, with the albums' cover art and liner notes constructing violence as an inherent characteristic of southern black men eking out a brutal existence in rural Mississippi. Violence is in general associated with black masculinity in a U.S. context, as has been widely theorized by many Gender Studies scholars including R.W. Connell and bell hooks. Connell's important work on manhood defined hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). Gender scholars have written about how and why violence is leveraged by what Connell refers to as "marginalized" masculinities occupied by minority groups to assert their manhood, as other avenues for attaining the "patriarchal dividends" gained by the subordination of women are unavailable to these men (79-80). Connell writes that white, hegemonic masculinity needs to marginalize black masculinity as a way to maintain power. "In a white-supremacist context, black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender construction...the fantasy figure of the black male rapist plays an important role in sexual politics among whites...Conversely, hegemonic masculinity among whites sustains the institutional oppression and physical terror that have framed the making of masculinities in black communities" (80).

Due to institutionalized racism in the United States, men of color can subscribe to violent masculinities because other avenues for achieving patriarchal dominance are unavailable to them, and they must simultaneously contend with wrongful stereotypes about being more violent. Connell identifies violence as a key part not just of hegemonic masculinity as a whole,

but especially amongst men occupying marginalized masculinities as “[w]hite fears of black men’s violence have a long history in colonial and post-colonial situations” (75). Within patriarchy, men must use both explicit violence and the threat of violence to maintain their power over women and other men. This has shaped the way in which black men have formed their masculinity within the confines of white supremacy. “Violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles...The youth gang violence of inner-city streets is a striking example of the assertion of marginalized masculinities against other men, continuous with the assertion of masculinity in sexual violence against women” (83). Connell argues that when marginalized men are denied ways to assert their masculinity, such as being economic providers for their families, they often turn to violence as a means of performing their male identity and leveraging what little power they do have.

Black feminist bell hooks writes about the violence exhibited amongst black men as well, stemming from the fact that “this is a culture that does not love black males, that they are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or girls and boys. And that especially most black men do not love themselves... Black males in the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but they are not loved” (ix). hooks identifies the effects of black men occupying the abject for mainstream, white society. “Seen as animals, brutes, natural-born rapists, and murderers, black men have no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented” (x). This speaks directly to the issues raised by Fat Possum’s marketing of its bluesmen, as the artists are portrayed as “animals, brutes, natural-born rapists, and murderers” in order to play on the thrill of viewing the abject. It could be argued that beloved urban bluesmen like B.B. King offer a counterexample to hooks’ claims, as King is presented as a well-dressed, smooth, and urbane musician. But Grazian’s study of urban bluemens in 1990s Chicago showed

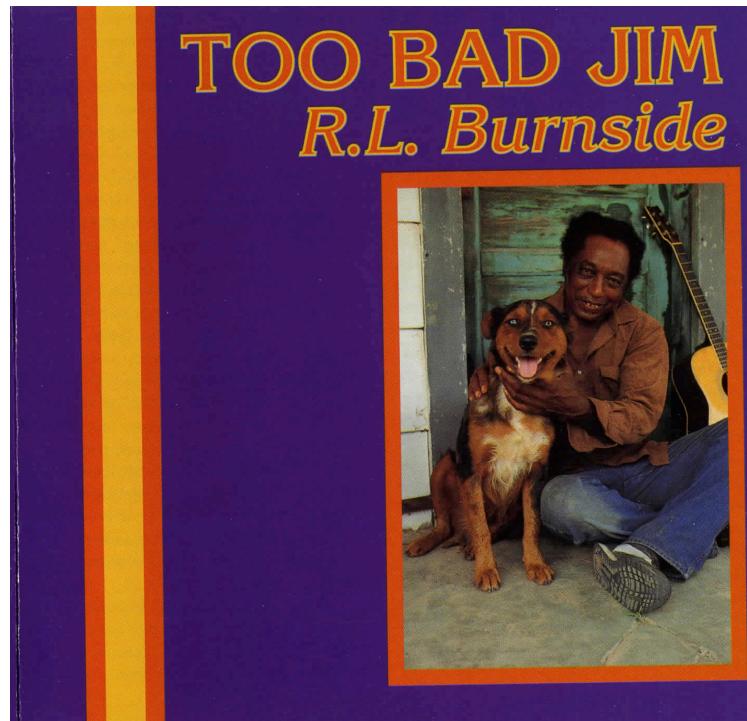
that though urban bluesmen display a different and possibly more refined masculinity than their rural peers, they still “have no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented” as white desires dictate their gender performance.

hooks identifies how violence has become an expected aspect of black masculinity, as even “[n]onviolent black males daily face a world that sees them as violent” (45). This violence is rewarded by a society that fears it, as violence is expected from black men and these stereotypes justify white supremacy. “What is unique to black male experience is the way in which acting violently often gets both attention and praise from the dominant culture. Even as it is being condemned, black male violence is often deified,” hooks writes (61). Fat Possum’s marketing is a prime example of the deification of black male violence, as violence and general badness are identified as key traits of the authentic bluesman, traits which are praised through Fat Possum’s hyperbole-laden record covers and liner notes. Fat Possum fans may commend this imagery as a reflection of the artists’ authenticity and a representation of how hill country blues laid the foundations for punk and grunge music without realizing that this representation of violent, bad black men serves the ideology of white supremacy.

The abject black male body is ever present on Fat Possum’s albums. On R.L. Burnside’s record *Too Bad Jim* the violence is much more subtle than on *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*, but it is still there, used to sell the bluesman’s experiences with violence as an indicator of his authenticity. The front cover is Burnside in a rather heartwarming photo with his signature snaggle-toothed grin hugging his dog. Burnside’s poverty is evident, but his lack of money has not prevented him from achieving a simple sort of happiness idealized in pastoral visions of the rural South. He sits on his wood front porch, smiling and embracing his dog, which also appears to be grinning. Leaned up against the wall next to them is not Burnside’s typical electric guitar,

but an acoustic one, which makes the softer music often used to characterize the rural. An acoustic guitar does not require electricity, is not loud, and is associated with archaic, romanticized images of safe and sanitized bluesmen of the past. By the early 1990s, when Robert Johnson's entire catalogue was released on a best-selling CD boxed set, no one would have been scandalized by the idea of a black man with an acoustic guitar playing traditional country blues (Billboard).

But, turn *Too Bad Jim* over and you find out that “Buck, R.L.’s dog featured on the cover, was killed in a drive-by shooting in late August, 1993.” The decision to include that statement colors all the album photos in a violence that someone not familiar with rural Mississippi may not have expected. The bucolic scene of Burnside and dog sitting on the porch becomes mired in dread. The reading of this image as pastoral is interrupted; beyond the frame there are anonymous people with guns aiming to intimidate and kill. The idea of a “drive-by shooting” is something typically associated with an urban setting, so imagining it in this rural context is jarring. This draws parallels between Burnside and the rappers Fat Possum makes connections with in their electronic remixes of his songs. Here Fat Possum is invoking coastal gangsta rap culture of the 1990s and implying that North Mississippi could be equally as dangerous as Compton or the Bronx. While Burnside could not look more different from a rapper on the cover of this album, his life and his blues clearly have something in common with those artists through their shared experiences of violence.



Buck, R.L.'s dog featured on the cover, was killed in a drive-by shooting in late August, 1993.

Produced by Robert Palmer  
Recording and Remix Engineer: Robbie Norris  
Assistants to the engineer: Bruce Watson & Keith Perler  
Photography by Lauri Lawson  
Layout and design: Sonny Bowen  
Recorded at Junior Kimbrough's juke joint, Chulahoma, Mississippi, and  
at Fat Possum World Headquarters, Oxford, Mississippi, in April 1993.  
Mixed at Quad Studios, New York, New York, by Robbie Norris and  
Robert Palmer  
Thanks to: JoBeth Britton, Michael Nichol, Ron Miller, Marcia  
Resnick, Randall Lyon, Junior and all the Kimbroughs, the  
Burnsides, Alex Obert (sacrificial victim), and Sabazius.

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For bookings in the U.S.A., please contact Mista Biggs Productions,  
P.O. Box 1001, Oxford, MS 38655.  
Telephone and Fax: (601) 236-3110

For bookings in Europe, please contact Bluebird  
Management and Booking, Ruusbroecgaarde 159, 5343  
JL Oss-Holland, Holland.  
Telephone: 31-4120-24536. Fax: 31-4120-38927

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Figure 6. R.L. Burnside, *Too Bad Jim*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections

The album *New Beats from the Delta*, which was also discussed in Chapter 1, makes explicit the label's desire to market its music towards a younger audience that is more interested in rap. This album does not invoke the same themes of blues masculinity that are used in the rest of Fat Possum's marketing. Since the company is targeting young southern fans of rap, southern gothic portrayals of the South as an abject, freaky space or exoticized older black men are absent from this album. Young southerners, and especially young black southerners, would likely not find themes invoked by T-Model Ford's illiteracy or a cartoon of R.L. Burnside about to rape two white girls appealing. Since *New Beats from the Delta* was only a one-off effort and there are not other albums like this in Fat Possum's catalogue, it seems that selling the South to outsiders using stereotypes about the region those audiences were already familiar with proved a more successful marketing venture.

Fat Possum's work makes productive connections between rap and blues, connections that are often ignored by older blues fans who seem to have an intolerance for rap. Johnson tells McInerney in his *New Yorker* interview, "The blues was the rap music of its time." Many rap music scholars have pointed out the similarities between the genres, with shared themes including speaking to the black experience in America, resistance against racism, and glorification of both wealth and sexual promiscuity. Rap also draws many of its sounds from blues traditions such as call-and-response. In her early study of rap music as a form of cultural resistance to hegemonic oppression, Tricia Rose looks at blues as a cultural antecedent to rap, "The blues has long been considered a musical form critical of dominant racial ideologies and a resistive cultural space for African Americans under harsh racist conditions. Yet, blues lyrics usually contain patriarchal and sexist ideas and presumptions" (104). For Rose the resistance,

violence, and sexism present in rap are connections to a blues tradition that shared the same traits, a blues tradition we see Fat Possum invoking.

Black southern artists that continue to practice these vernacular music traditions have also identified the links between blues and rap, and their recognition of this lineage is equally as important if not more so than commentary from a music scholar. Folklorist and documentarian Ali Colleen Neff's study on the Delta hip-hop community in Clarksdale, Mississippi reveals how contemporary black southern rappers believe their music is linked to blues traditions, and how most blues tourists and fans visiting "the birthplace of the blues" purposefully ignore rap music. Neff collaborated with Delta rappers to produce her book and documentary, and spent years living and researching in Clarksdale's black spaces. This work resulted in an illuminating look at contemporary artistic production from the Delta that has been totally ignored by white consumers, though those white consumers swarm towns like Clarksdale searching for "authentic" black expression. Neff points out that, "The master of words has always held a central role in the black Delta community...In the Mississippi Delta, the skills of oral and musical improvisation are highly valued and are carefully cultivated through everyday practices of creative challenge and hard work" (9). Neff's informant the Clarksdale rapper TopNotch the Villain told her "Like I said, we call it the mergin' of blues to rap. Like I said, we gonna transcend it and we gonna tell you what we're talkin' about, with rap emerging from the blues or what have you..." (109). Black artists in the Mississippi Delta are clearly practicing a musical tradition that has evolved from blues, which itself evolved from other creative practices that emphasized word play and musical improvisation. But, as Neff notes in several anecdotes, blues fans coming to the Delta are not at all interested in rap music and are not present in the spaces where her informants perform (75). Fat Possum's embrace of the shared heritage between blues

and rap is productive for its historical accuracy and brave for its lack of fear about alienating blues fans.

One less productive way the label has sold the South to outsiders has been by embracing a southern gothic motif in its marketing. Fat Possum uses a romanticized notion of violence to create that aesthetic, infusing its productions with elements of classic southern gothic novels, freak shows, and horror films. This is a stylistic way to portray the bluesmen and the violence they have experienced using an aesthetic that audiences are likely familiar with when thinking about the South. For Fat Possum, violence and a rural southern landscape are intertwined.

*Darker Blues* begins with a description of the Mississippi Delta by historian John Barry from his book *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. “Violence and passion were everywhere, bred in its endlessly flat earth,” Barry writes. “The homicide rate in Mississippi dwarfed that of the rest of the nation, and the Delta’s dwarfed that of the rest of Mississippi.”<sup>9</sup> This is the gothic vision of Mississippi the label wants to gain its audience’s interest.

The southern gothic is particularly obvious in the albums by the disabled bluesman Cedell Davis. Davis stoically states in *Can You See Me Laughin’*, “Looks like trouble just hit me period.” As discussed in the previous chapter, Davis’s life indeed seems to have been a series of unfortunate events that culminated in him being wheelchair-bound and losing much of the use of his hands. Davis repeats the tales of misfortune that led to his disabilities in *Can You See Me Laughin’* and Palmer writes about his life in the liner notes of *Feel Like Doin’ Something Wrong*. In part because of these events and Davis’ response to them, Palmer claims that the musician is “so damn real.”

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<sup>9</sup> Barry emphasizes that at the beginning of the first World War, “Neither black nor white turned the other cheek” and murder rates were astounding for both races (132).

Fat Possum portrays Davis' life as being a bizarre series of accidents that rendered him a grotesque figure and culminated in his unique guitar playing. Davis is marketed using a horror movie motif that exoticizes his disabilities, making him into a freak character from a southern gothic story. His disability is connected to a dark, bizarre southern past in which contracting polio and being nearly trampled to death in a bar raid were things that could actually happen to a person. The album *The Horror of It All* features multiple pictures of Davis' empty wheelchair to highlight his position as a disabled freak. *The Horror of It All* and *The Best of CeDell Davis* use a cheesy horror movie font and a black-and-red color palate to make them look creepy. This marketing is somewhat appropriate to Davis' music, which uses strange alternate tunings and a slide style resulting in eerie and sometimes bizarre-sounding music. Even though aspects of his music might make this aesthetic seem fitting, the southern gothic narrative serves to portray Davis as a freak character from a short story rather than a musician who has overcome incredible hardships to create a completely unique style of music.



Figure 7. Cedell Davis, *The Horror of It All*. University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

Davis is not the only one whose violent background and life receives the southern gothic treatment from Fat Possum. The liner notes of T-Model Ford's *Pee-Wee Get My Gun* portray both Ford and his drummer "Spam" as figures occupying a southern gothic alternate reality. Johnson writes that, "Although Fat Possum makes it its business to trod some wild paths, the wildest yet has to be the one that T-Model's drummer, Spam, lives on." These liner notes are one of the most explicit examples of Johnson creating a mythic rural Mississippi, "the worst place to live," which is gothic in its many horrors but simultaneously beautiful because it "inspire[s] the strangest and loudest howls." The fact that Johnson deems it necessary to add these details in the

liner notes shows how important using violence to construct a bizarre southern gothic alternate reality in which these bluesmen live is to Fat Possum's overall marketing strategy. Listeners are supposed to be intrigued enough by these strange tales from way down South, which confirm and embellish stereotypes about the region, that they will buy the album to see what characters like Cedell Davis, T-Model Ford, and Spam sound like.

Another important characteristic of blues masculinity is sexual depravity, which bell hooks identifies as “the imposition onto [the black male] body of white racist sexist pornographic sexual fantasies” (63). Sexual deviance and taboos still associated with the idea of miscegenation—crossing sexual boundaries between black and white, young and old—could not be more obvious than they are on the cover of *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*. The artwork for Burnside’s record *Mr. Wizard* uses the same themes as *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey*, which suggests that Fat Possum found this imagery to be a good marketing technique. The cover is another cartoon of Burnside by artist Derek Hess, with the bluesman again flanked by two scantily clad young white women. This time Burnside is depicted as a southern gothic wizard character, which invokes the themes of voodoo and magic found in many blues songs. Burnside reaches out toward the viewer as if casting a spell, while the twin blonde women in bikinis sit at his feet, clinging to his legs and brandishing swords as if protecting him. These figures are shown against a backdrop of various occult symbols, playing on the old blues imagery of voodoo, rabbit’s feet, and John the Conqueror root.



Figure 8. R.L. Burnside, *Mr. Wizard*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

Burnside's album covers were not the only place that Fat Possum used cartoons in its marketing. Comic book illustrations were tools that Fat Possum often used to illustrate (literally) the lives of its artists and romanticize certain aspects of those lives. *Darker Blues* includes a comic by cartoonist Joe Sacco titled *The Rude Blues*. Here we are presented with cartoon images of the label's bluesmen that border on minstrelsy, recalling the cartoons of blackface stereotypes that were used to promote race records during the 1920s and '30s. In his discussion of using minstrel imagery to sell blues records, Hagstrom Miller looks at the artwork produced by race records company Okeh. "Companies had been using blackface humor to sell music for some

time. Okeh's cartoon illustrations simply perpetuated this trend. Pictures of thick-lipped minstrel men, smiling blackface dandies, and bandana-wearing mammies filled Okeh's race record advertisements...Other companies soon followed Okeh's lead" (206-7). Fat Possum has simply updated this model, using present-day imagery to depict very old anxieties about the sexuality and violence of black males.

*The Rude Blues* plays on stereotypes from the minstrel era, depicting the Fat Possum bluesmen as drunken, lascivious, impoverished, and uneducated. The comic begins, "It's a loud sound that comes from the deepest South, from the land that America forgot, impoverished and violent and crack-ridden Mississippi." The following panels depict T-Model Ford as he drunkenly dances with young women while partying during a R.L. Burnside show until he passes out. Knives are wielded, Ford repeats a story about childhood beatings from his father that caused him to lose a testicle, and the artists are repeatedly presented with alcohol in hand. The idea of these artists as being nearly elderly and the last remaining remnants of a past that deserves preserving is also invoked here as Sacco writes, with language we would use to refer to animals and not men, that Fat Possum is "seemingly on a suicide mission to record the hardest, nastiest bluesmen before that species goes extinct." Sacco also writes that when visiting where the Fat Possum bluesmen are from he "drove through small towns and down back roads that probably haven't changed much since Robert Johnson sang about 'the blues falling down like hail'." The place these artists live is represented as being the same as it was when the blues began, lost to time and modernization.



Figure 9. Various Artists, *Not the Same Old Blues Crap II*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

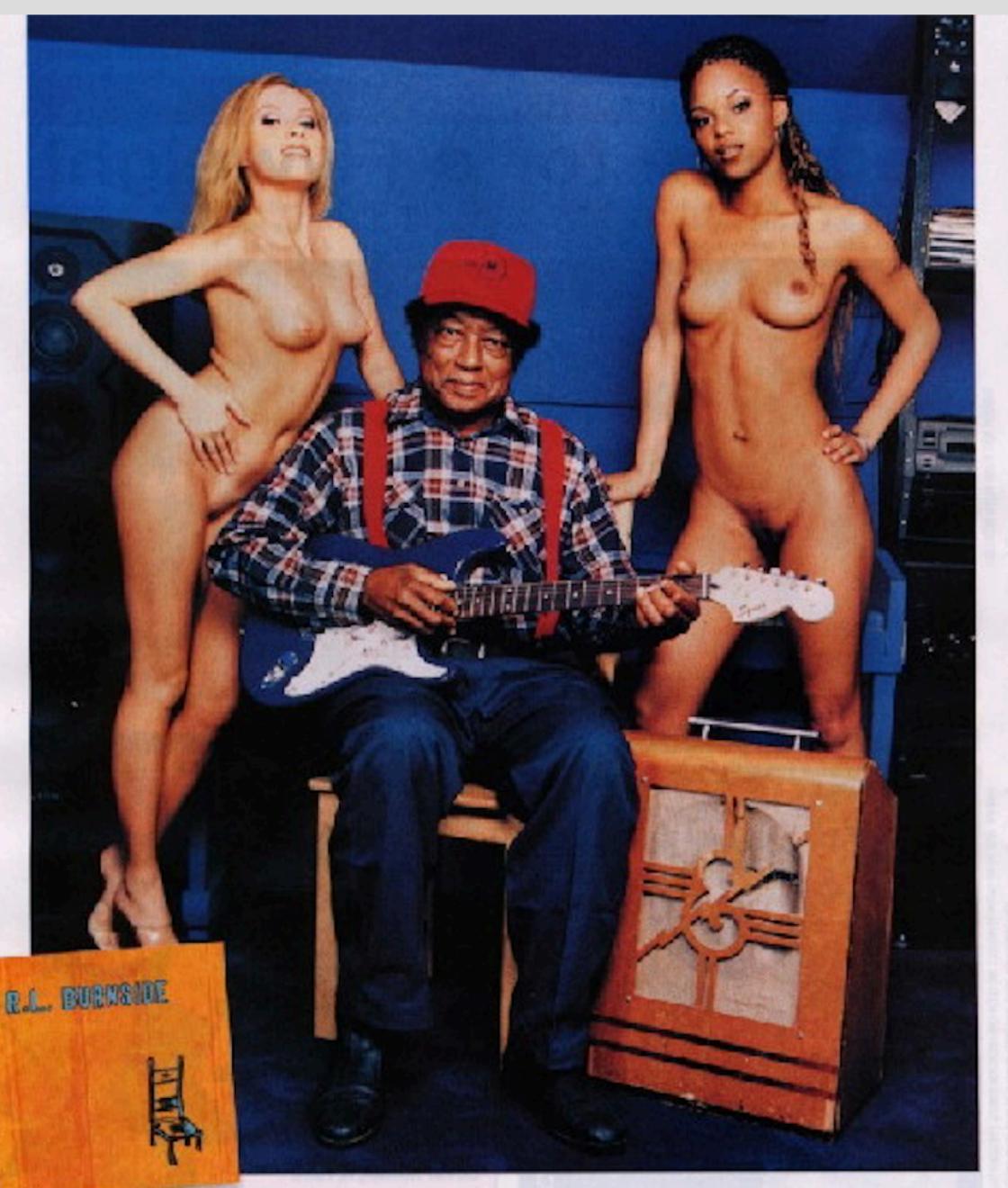
The best-of compilation of the label's material titled *Not the Same Old Blues Crap II* uses more comics by Sacco. R.L. Burnside is drawn with a pistol in hand saying, "I can't outrun 'em, I can't whup these youngsters, I need something to stop them with." T-Model Ford is shown being embraced by young white women and discussing his sexual virility. Paul "Wine" Jones exhibits an outsider perspective, saying, "Looks like things are going bad against me. Every body talk bad about me. I ain't did nothing." As in *The Rude Blues*, Fat Possum's cartoon album covers offer little more than violent, backwards, backwoods, oversexed southern black men.

In his analysis of race records advertisements run in the *Chicago Defender*, Mark Dolan shows how ads for blues records showed a romanticized and a benighted south to an audience of southern expatriates while portraying black blues musicians using minstrel stereotypes. Dolan argues that the ads for race records placed in the *Defender* worked against the paper's rhetoric of respectability and uplift by illustrating the good and the bad about country life back home in the South. In order to do this, the ads often "spoke through minstrel stereotypes" and "mimick[ed] black vernacular" (110). The way Dolan describes the blues musicians in these cartoon ads could be lifted from this context and into a description of Fat Possum's cartoon album covers. "Interlopers on the page, these drifting singers fell prey to the record labels' minstrelization, ambiguously promising to sing the truth of things from behind the veil of blues personas," Dolan writes (117). "The illustrators then used the performers' likeness in varied incarnations, aging, exaggerating, and dandifying them" (119).

In his analysis of race records advertisements in the book *Early Downhome Blues*, Jeff Todd Titon argues that race records ads served to soothe white anxieties about black folks streaming northward during the Great Migration. He writes, "by treating downhome blues as a kind of folk music, the industry put the black in his place: back in time and far away in the country, or newly arrived and in wonder at the city" (221). Titon notices that the illustrators and copywriters creating these advertisements reveal a curious tension between the things they know and do not know about the music they are attempting to sell, and we see this tension repeated in the cartoons that Fat Possum uses to sell its records. Titon writes, "The illustrators were aware of some of the things they were up to," and he gives the example of sexual imagery in cartoon ads for songs filled with innuendo (253). But conversely, "The advertising men probably were unaware of some of the implications," and Titon notes that blues and religious material were

backlisted together, which would hurt the sale of sacred song (253). Titon concludes that “black people responded to the advertisements—whether they were insulted, amused, or both—they certainly bought the records. Meanwhile the industry, emphasizing that this was real, honest-to-goodness, old-fashioned, country folk music, both kept the black in his place and suggested that place was a healthy one” (257).

Dolan argues that the blues musicians from the race records era could find empowerment from behind these minstrelizations, but offers little evidence to support his argument. “[T]he stereotyping of female and male blues artists became a record industry tactic as the labels sought to market black music to black readers. Such stereotypes, both in the ads and in the music, offered blues artists a newfound ownership of then familiar images, drawing strength and identity from the exaggeration” (113). Because Dolan does not give us analysis of blues songs that perhaps take on minstrel stereotypes using dark humor or quotes from musicians on their feelings about these portrayals, his assertion that blues artists drew “strength and identity from exaggeration” can only be taken as conjecture. Especially in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, by the 1990s and today minstrel stereotypes are not viewed as acceptable portrayals of African Americans. Dolan writes that, “Clearly, the record companies viewed ads featuring black stereotypes as an effective marketing strategy for appealing to black audiences; they sought not to offend readers but to sell records, though the stereotypes contained explicit and implicit messages for the readers that advertisers hoped would buy the music” (113). It is not really clear that race records labels or Fat Possum are trying not to offend, but they certainly are trying to sell records; sometimes offense and selling music can go hand in hand. The use of the cartoon as a medium for blues advertisement or marketing is for Fat Possum a clear throwback to these race records ads.



## WHAT SORT OF BLUESMAN READS HUSTLER?

He plays rough and stays hard. He isn't stuck on tradition, but he knows where he came from. At 76, R.L. Burnside knocks the blinders off a new generation of artists with his inventive, pure Mississippi blues. Studies show that more than 99.999% of HUSTLER readers prefer raw, innovative entertainment, such as R.L.'s tenth album, *Wish I Was in Heaven Sitting Down* (on Fat Possum Records, distributed by Epitaph). R.L.'s portrait above proves that no hardcore legend needs to die to take his seat in paradise; as readers of America's Magazine know, a slice of heaven awaits in every HUSTLER Honey. (Source: June 2001 LFP.)

Figure 10. "What Sort of Bluesman Reads Hustler?" *Hustler Magazine*, June 2001, pp. 12, from the personal collection of Scott Barretta.

The minstrel stereotype of the oversexed black male appears again, in a photograph instead of a cartoon, in a June 2001 ad from *Hustler* magazine. The advertisement for Burnside's tenth record, *Wish I Was in Heaven Sitting Down*, features a photograph of the artist sitting on a chair holding his electric guitar, flanked by a pair of completely naked young women. A writer from the *Los Angeles Times* was present for the photo shoot and wrote that the scene was a "bargain-basement bacchanal" in which Burnside was "treated like some septuagenarian Caligula" (Weingarten). "The idea is to play with the myth that's grown around him—that he's some kind of unrepentant wild man who chafes at decorum and lives by his own primitive code" (Weingarten). In the image the women, likely less than half Burnside's age, are posing in a highly sexualized manner, revealing their breasts and genitals. If the women were removed from the photograph, one would not even notice they were gone, as Burnside seems to be ignoring them and just smiles at the camera. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote of the shoot, "Burnside barely looks up at the models. Instead of leering, he just flashes an occasional thumbs-up at his manager, Matthew Johnson, as if to say, 'how am I doing?'... Burnside is the picture of restraint. No bawdy jokes or double-entendres, just an occasional 'well, well well.'" (Weingarten). The "myth" that this article refers to of Burnside being a "wild man" is not one that has organically "grown" around the artist, but something that has been cultivated by Johnson and Fat Possum, here with some help from *Hustler*. The text accompanying the advertisement is worth quoting at length:

He plays rough and stays hard. He isn't stuck on tradition, but he knows where he came from. At 76, R.L. Burnside knocks the blinders off a new generation of artists with his inventive, pure Mississippi blues. Studies show that 99.999% of HUSTLER readers prefer raw, innovative entertainment, such as R.L.'s tenth album, *Wish I Was in Heaven Sitting Down*. R.L.'s portrait above proves that no hard-core legend needs to die to take his seat in paradise; as readers of America's Magazine know, a slice of heaven awaits in every HUSTLER honey.

In the photo, Burnside does not seem particularly interested in the two “HUSTLER honeys” standing beside him, but his lack of acknowledgement of the women does not prevent them from representing a deviant sexuality similar to the one invoked on the covers of *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey* and *Mr. Wizard*. Again we see implied sexual relations between different races and ages, with two anonymous women operating purely as receptacles for the viewer’s sexual desire. The text from the ad features much of the same language as is used in Fat Possum’s liner notes. The idea of Burnside as a man able to play “rough” enough to “knock the blinders off a new generation of artists” is the same concept behind Fat Possum’s marketing of its artists as better, badder antecedents to modern artists. Burnside’s authenticity as a bluesman is emphasized with his music being called “raw” and “pure, Mississippi blues.” By using this text to accompany this image, the idea of a “raw” and “pure” Mississippi bluesman is connected to a hypersexual black male seeking to have sex with women less than half his age.

T-Model Ford is also sexualized by Fat Possum’s marketing, which emphasizes Ford’s status as a womanizer. In *The Rude Blues* and the cover of *Not the Same Old Blues Crap II*, Sacco draws Ford as a lascivious old man eager to commit the same kinds of miscegenation invoked on R.L. Burnside’s cartoon album covers. *The Rude Blues* opens with Ford partying with young women at an R.L. Burnside show. “He starts shaking as much 78-year-old booty as his one hip joint allows... a gracious T-Model, who three years ago, I’m told, wouldn’t look a white waitress in the face—fondles the proffered breasts and rubs himself against the willing asses of women half a century his junior,” Sacco writes. On the cover of *Not the Same Old Blues Crap II*, Ford is drawn with two white women on either side of him, kissing his cheeks and caressing his chest through his shirt. “The women, they got crazy ‘bout me... When my old lady done left, sh\*\* I just opened a door and let ‘em come in,” he says. The way in which these

promotional materials repeatedly obsess over Ford's sexual appetite reveals both the taboos he is breaking and how fascinating it is for Fat Possum's audience to think about taboo acts being committed.

Junior Kimbrough's sex life is portrayed in similar ways. In many articles about the bluesman, journalists seem to find it necessary to repeat the fact that he has dozens of children (the *New Yorker* article claims there are 32 known children of Kimbrough's, many of whom believe that Fat Possum owes them money) and keeps a bachelor's apartment in Holly Springs, even though he lives with his longtime partner Mildred Washington. In *Darker Blues*, an anecdote from Iggy Pop is included in which the proto-punk icon describes how Kimbrough liked air conditioning because, he said, "then when I'm fuckin' I don't get too hot." These examples involving Kimbrough, Burnside, and Ford show that using a rapacious sexuality to otherize these artists has been a productive marketing tactic by invoking familiar stereotypes about the sexual appetite of African American men.

In addition to sex and violence, an impoverished, rural location in Mississippi was used by Fat Possum to exoticize its artists, as is seen in the influence of the southern gothic on the label's marketing. This serves to set the bluesmen apart from their audience, who likely do not live in rural Mississippi. This also grants these artists authenticity, placing them in a long lineage of blues artists from the region who experienced similar rural living and poverty in a place that is often portrayed as perhaps not having changed much since the days of iconic bluesmen past. In the liner notes to Burnside's *Too Bad Jim*, Robert Palmer describes the history of Mississippi hill country blues and emphasizes the isolated rural area where Burnside learned his craft from the legendary Fred McDowell. "Back up in those wooded hills, communities still experience an isolation no longer encountered in the Delta... Localized dialects and vocabulary are still

prevalent, often so thick and idiosyncratic that Mississippians from a few counties over can't catch everything being said," Palmer writes. Since in the popular imagination the blues is most heavily associated with the Mississippi Delta region, something that is evident in Palmer's own early book *Deep Blues*, here Palmer is setting up the Mississippi hill country as an even more authentic blues location due to the area's isolation from the contaminating sources of modernization and popular culture.

That rural location is accompanied by poverty. In interviews and in the documentary on the label, Johnson repeats an anecdote about Burnside attempting to prevent his Social Security benefits from being garnished. The documentary also shows in several scenes the small, dilapidated home in which Burnside lived with his extended family. Later in the film, Johnson points out that Burnside seemed to be supporting more and more family members each time his performance fees were increased. While Burnside was making money from his music, he clearly experienced a type of poverty that most of Fat Possum's audience are likely unfamiliar with and can never know. Burnside's modest home in North Mississippi is shown in album photos as well as the documentary, and was often written about by journalists (McInerney). He sits on his front porch on the cover of *Too Bad Jim*, and on the back side of his record *Come On In*, there is a black and white photo of Burnside playing electric guitar in his kitchen, where we see the refrigerator door chained shut so that the various family members who may be staying at his home do not eat all of his food (Newton).

Johnson's liner notes for T-Model Ford's album *Pee-Wee Get My Gun* construct a particular vision of Mississippi in which Fat Possum's bluesmen live, and how this place has created the music Fat Possum releases. "Mississippi has got to be the worst place to live. Schools suck, infant mortality really sucks and Mississippians have called on the casinos to save us.

However, being number fifty out of fifty is not completely without perks...It's no secret that the worst places have always inspired the strangest and loudest howls, and T-Model Ford's savage moan is no exception," Johnson writes. Fat Possum's productions romanticize the negative aspects of living in rural Mississippi, and attribute the quality of music made by the label's bluesmen to these living conditions. Fat Possum's bluesmen are shown as being attached to the rural landscapes where they live. Though there are so many negative qualities associated with living in these places, it seems without this particular, unpleasant location Fat Possum's blues would not be possible.

A fondness for or dependence on alcohol is another trait of Fat Possum's blues artists that the label emphasizes to give them a quality of excess associated with grunge, rap, and rock and roll. This again is not a new theme in blues, as rock musicians in the 1950s and 1960s picked up a romanticized self-destruction from hard-drinking pre-war blues artists.<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing alcohol use draws parallels between Fat Possum's artists and boozy bluesmen of the past, as well as between those artists and young rock and rap artists who exhibit similar romanticized self-destructive behaviors. For Burnside, aside from the obvious ass pocket of whiskey, a fondness for alcohol and wild, drunken parties is emphasized in Robert Palmer's liner notes for *Too Bad Jim*. Palmer calls Burnside the "[v]eteran of a thousand crazed, moonshine-fueled house parties, himself the proprietor of a series of country juke joints fabled for their toxicity." The album artwork for *Wish I Was in Heaven Sitting Down* features a cartoon illustration of a bottle of moonshine, marked with a triple X. Jay Babcock's liner notes to the live album *Burnside on Burnside* pick up this theme, taking the time to point out that Burnside's "cough medicine" used

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<sup>10</sup> Palmer, *Deep Blues*, pp. 56-7

to combat a recurring sinus infection “smells suspiciously like Jack Daniel.” The liner notes to *Mr. Wizard* claim that Burnside “works half drunk.”

Burnside is not the only Fat Possum bluesman who is portrayed as loving to drink. All of Fat Possum’s artists seem to be hard drinkers, with Burnside and more famously Junior Kimbrough running juke joints in north Mississippi that became widely known as places to party, drink moonshine, and listen to blues. As Kimbrough gained fame from his Fat Possum releases, people as famous as Bono took pilgrimages to Holly Springs to his juke joint Junior’s Place (*You See Me Laughin’*). Palmer writes in the liner notes of *All Night Long* about his drunken experiences at that iconic venue in a passage quoted at length in Chapter 1.

In *The Rude Blues*, T-Model Ford is depicted getting very drunk while R.L. Burnside plays during their joint tour called The Juke Joint Caravan Tour. The 78-year-old gets so wasted that he ends up passing out after being given too many drinks by the young women he was partying with and scares everyone into thinking he might die. When he is woken up, he immediately asks for more whiskey. Later in the strip, artist Joe Sacco draws himself having to drive T-Model and Spam back home after the tour is over. In a panel showing T-Model talking about his life—“Man, I done been through some shit”—he is holding a McDonald’s fountain drink cup that Sacco labels, “It ain’t orange juice.”

In addition to their alcohol abuse, Fat Possum’s artists are also affected by illegal drug use, in particular the crack epidemic that has made its way to rural Mississippi. Crack cocaine has traveled from America’s inner cities to rural communities in Mississippi, partially by way of the reverse migration of African Americans from northern cities back to their families’ southern home places. From the 1970s onward, data on migration patterns has revealed that African Americans are moving to the South from other regions of the U.S., reversing the pattern of the

Great Migration that took place in the first half of the twentieth century, in which African Americans left the South for better opportunities elsewhere. According to the Brookings Institution's analysis of the 2000 census, the data "documents a full-scale reversal of black Americans' migration out of the South—a movement that dominated the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century... Overall, the South's gains over the 1995-2000 period roughly doubled those recorded in the 1990 census and tripled those recorded in the 1980 census" (11). Most of the reverse migration has been driven by college-educated African Americans moving to southern metropolitan areas, especially Atlanta, but rural places like Mississippi have seen what geographers Brown and Cromartie call "homeplace migration," a phenomenon when relatives tied to a place through family connections return to a location that is not necessarily their birthplace, but is thought of as their family homeland. Economic opportunities in the New South, ties to family and home, and urban decay in northern inner cities have been factors motivating the reverse migration back South (Brown & Cromartie, 190).

In some cases rather than escaping violence and crime in the northern inner city by moving back to the rural south, those problems have followed migrants. The Mississippi economy is so depressed and the culture is so entrenched in racism that drugs can serve as the only way for black folks to make money to feed their families, or to use to escape a depressing, monotonous existence.<sup>11</sup> The ethnography accompanying Brown and Cromartie's study of homeplace migration to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta provides a harrowing example of how crime and drugs, typically coded as inner city, urban problems, have spread to rural, southern environs through the reverse migration. R.L. Burnside's biography is a glimpse of the reverse

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<sup>11</sup> Jesmyn Ward has written eloquently about the way the drug trade has impacted her small, majority-black, rural Mississippi Gulf Coast hometown of DeLisle. Ward, Jesmyn. *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*, Bloomsbury, 2013.

migration in one person's life, rather than taking place over a more typical several generations.

Burnside was born in the Mississippi hill country and moved to Chicago when he was young, but while he was living there his father, brother, and two uncles were all murdered within a year. Burnside was so frightened by this violence that he returned home and never moved out of Mississippi again.

McInerney points out to *New Yorker* readers that crack-related violence has hollowed out small Delta towns like T-Model Ford's Greenville, "More than a decade after it ravaged northern cities, crack has replaced moonshine as the mainstay of the Delta's underground economy." In *The Rude Blues*, Ford and R.L. Burnside's guitarist/"adopted son" Kenny Brown discuss the way crack has impacted their lives. Ford is drawn standing in front of the trailer in Greenville where he lives, discussing how the town's youth and their "dope" has made Greenville an unpleasant place to be. Brown decided to move to Memphis after crack addicts robbed his Holly Springs home while he was on tour. For those unfamiliar with rural Mississippi, this is an unexpected problem. Similar to the drive-by shooting invoked on the back cover of Burnside's *Too Bad Jim*, discussing the crack problem in rural Mississippi was a way to make connections with rap music, which is heavily associated with the drug. Overall, dealing with substance abuse was a characteristic that most of the Fat Possum bluesmen shared.

These characteristics of violence, sexual depravity, a rural location, poverty, and drunkenness coalesce into a stereotype of rural southern black men that has existed for as long as African Americans have been present in the rural South. In her book *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*, Riché Richardson uses Kristeva's theorizings of the abject to examine the incestuous Trueblood character in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. She argues that the rural black southerner is one of the most marginalized figures in American

culture. Richardson writes that black bodies in the rural South have historically been categorized as pathological, deviant, morally corrupt, and sexually perverse, which has justified their expendability. Richardson's analysis of the Trueblood character could easily be applied to the caricature that Fat Possum created to represent its artists. This rural black southern man is primitive, animalistic, and a figure for white voyeurism. Just as Trueblood serves as an object for white men to observe and study, the bluesmen at Fat Possum are otherized in order to fascinate a white audience.

The white male gaze serviced by Fat Possum's blues roster extends from grunge fans to academics to music critics. Robert Palmer, who was an academic, music critic, and producer for Fat Possum, was exemplary in this regard. He used the liner notes for Fat Possum's records to develop his theory about blues and chaos, which he centers on Burnside and the other Fat Possum artists. In the notes to *Too Bad Jim*, Palmer describes Burnside as "the connoisseur of chaos" and writes that "R.L.'s blues is chaos on wheels." Some anecdotes he uses to prop up these ideas include a time when Palmer saw Burnside "wave a pistol in the middle of a packed juke joint" and when Palmer says Burnside "drifted past a microphone that just happened to be recording, muttering darkly to himself 'The Devil, that's who I've been serving.'" Palmer also describes "a rapid-fire sequences of disasters" that preceded the recording of *Too Bad Jim*, including broken instruments and the collapse of a door to the recording area that was "prevented from smashing the recording board only through the timely intervention of the producer's [Palmer's] skull." Palmer writes that Burnside's playful, trickster personality enjoyed these chaotic events that seemed to occur "for no good reason," except the principle of chaos. The most chaotic days produced the best recording sessions, and Palmer interprets that this chaos put Burnside in a more creative mood.

The liner notes of *Mr. Wizard* reveal that the title comes from this chaos idea. Here Burnside is portrayed as a malevolent wizard who causes bad things to happen around him because he enjoys the chaos those events produce. “It’s him who guides the Chevrolet van towards disaster,” the liner notes say of Burnside. “Things go wrong wherever R.L. goes—little things like amps exploding and big things like train wrecks—and they don’t stop till he’s gone. These things aren’t coincidental. They take a lot of work and the Wizard deserves the credit.” Just as Palmer wrote in the notes to *Too Bad Jim*, Burnside is depicted as enjoying all the bad things he allegedly causes, “As with all wizards, the older he gets the more disaster he needs around him so he can, y’ know, feel good about himself and relax.” Violent, chaotic events like “tidal waves, volcanoes, and yes, even wars—they are all his buddies.” Through this chaos idea, violent black masculinity takes on a supernatural element in which all kinds of violent disasters are attributed to the bluesman, not only interpersonal violence, which makes Burnside seem like baddest of them all.

While Palmer’s chaos theory could be an interesting one, the facts he uses to uphold it involve alcohol, more violence, sex, an impoverished location in which everything seems to be falling apart, and invocations of the Devil, all tired stereotypes fans of the blues have seen before. Palmer’s emphasis on drunken juke joint mayhem and waving pistols in these liner notes is continuous with the imagery presented in the artwork on their covers. When “chaos” is used to refer to drunken nights and unpredictable, violent behavior, it is just placing a new word on an old stereotype about black men.

Folklorist David Evans critiqued Palmer for his chaos theory in a lecture given at the American Folklore Society in 1999, saying that Palmer and Fat Possum were “confusing dissatisfaction, experimentation, and improvisation in the blues with chaos and anarchy.” Evans

additionally scoffed at the use of sampling and remixes, saying “[u]ltimately the chaos myth puts the blues up for grabs, reducing it to a mere collection of found objects.” While Evans referred to Palmer’s chaos theory as one of many blues mythologies, he did not address how this one also perpetuates gendered and racialized stereotypes about southern rural black men that are prominent in the other blues mythologies he refers to. When white men mediate and interpret the blues for white male audiences, they seem to miss the gendered aspects of the mythologies they seek to critique.

My examination of Fat Possum’s marketing of its blues artists has revealed that popular audiences continue to understand the blues with many of the same assumptions and essentialisms they have historically subscribed to. In *Darker Blues*, Johnson writes that, “Fat Possum is always being criticized for being disrespectful, for not being reverent in our marketing and publicity. Old bluesmen are supposed to be bad people.” This thesis joins the voices of those critics, as it is not the bluesmen themselves who are choosing to be portrayed as “bad people,” but Johnson’s views of what those artists are “supposed to be.” While many of the things Fat Possum emphasizes in its marketing are indeed true about the artists, Fat Possum’s choice to highlight characteristics like prison time and sexual promiscuity reveals that these things are important to the label. For example, it is not necessary to discuss that Burnside and Ford have been to prison, but the label does so repeatedly. Analyzing which characteristics of the bluesmen Fat Possum chose to highlight and romanticize confirms Riché Richardson’s conclusions about U.S. society’s simultaneous abhorrence of and fascination with a southern rural black masculinity. While Richardson uses Ellison’s incestuous Trueblood as her example of this abject figure, my examination of Fat Possum’s marketing of its blues artists has shown she could have turned to a more contemporary example.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SAME OLD BLUES CRAP: MATTHEW JOHNSON AND HOW WHITE MASCULINITY SHAPES THE BLUES

“In case you haven’t noticed, American teenagers, the record-buying public, don’t associate blues with anything good. How could they when all they’ve been exposed to is the cheesy, cigar-smoking, frat-rock and tourist-trap side of it. At the other end of the spectrum, and the other side of the bar, but just as distasteful, are the folklorists and musicologists,” Fat Possum records founder Matthew Johnson writes in the introduction to the coffee table book on the label, *Darker Blues*. The Oxford, Mississippi-based Fat Possum gained recognition, and famous fans, including Bono and Iggy Pop, in the late 1990s with its records and remixes of music by what Johnson alleged were Mississippi’s last remaining bluesmen. The label’s ability to sell blues music to an audience of young, white fans hinged on Matthew Johnson’s iconoclastic persona and his choice to market this raw, strange form of the blues he heard around Mississippi’s rural juke joints as proto-punk and proto-rap music.

In the passage above, Matthew Johnson positions himself as an outsider passing judgment on the blues establishment, rebuking not only the “cheesy, cigar-smoking, frat-rock and tourist-trap” aspect of the commercial blues records that were popular at the time, but also the field recordings made by folklorists and other academics. Johnson’s “rebel persona” allowed him to construct the blues albums he released at Fat Possum as being superior to other forms of blues music (Hale, 8, 42, 305). Ironically, using this narrative to accomplish that task places Johnson in a lineage of white male blues influencers he claims to despise. Johnson, the badass who hates the blues establishment, is using the same rebel persona that the folklorists, record company owners, and blues fans he hates have also inhabited throughout the genre’s history. In attempting to push away from those figures, Johnson reveals how similar his work is to theirs. This illustrates how white male blues influencers continue to shape the genre in familiar ways, and shows that audiences are still understanding blues through stereotypes about rural southern black masculinity that have circulated since the genre was first marketed in the early 1920s.

This chapter will examine how white male influencers have shaped the narrative of the blues, and how Johnson’s persona and work reinforces that narrative. My argument contradicts the image Johnson presents in interviews, where he often heavily critiques folklorists, record collectors, and blues fans, and presents himself and Fat Possum as doing something different from those figures. Johnson’s desire to establish himself as a raconteur-type outsider in order to push away from the blues establishment ultimately fails, as the folklorists and record collectors of the mid-twentieth century who shaped the blues genre’s narrative in the ways that he critiques created their own outsider, rebel images in much the same way that he does. This chapter contributes to recent revisionist blues scholarship that interrogates the white male gaze on African American blues musicians throughout the genre’s history. The importance of figures I

will refer to as “white male blues influencers” to the genre has been explored by many contemporary blues scholars. This scholarship represents the current thoughts on how white audiences and people Benjamin Filene has called “cultural brokers” or “cultural mediators” have shaped a prevailing narrative of the blues (5-6). White male blues influencers can take the form of folklorists, record label owners, scholars, record collectors, writers, or blues fans. However they exercise their fandom, they must be obsessed by blues music and see themselves as authorities on it. They use their position of power as white men to interpret blues for an audience rather than allowing blues musicians to interpret and explain their own art. White male blues influencers have been influential forces on the blues as a genre because these men decided they know better than black or white popular audiences and the artists themselves when it comes to what blues is good or bad, real or fake. Marybeth Hamilton has even suggested that “the Delta blues” were invented by a white record collector and tastemaker named James McKune in a Brooklyn YMCA, rather than by the musicians practicing the musical tradition in the Mississippi River Delta (209).

Matthew Johnson attempted to separate himself from the blues establishment populated by these cultural mediators by emphasizing what a rebellious punk he was. In adopting this narrative, Johnson was picking up on an idea that has served the needs of many of the disillusioned white men who discovered and influenced the blues before him. Grace Hale describes the fascination with rebellion exhibited by young, middle-class, white men in post-war America and interrogates what she calls “the romance of the outsider, the belief that people somehow marginal to society possess cultural resources and values missing among other Americans” (1). African American music, including blues, is just one of many ways in which the romance of the outsider has played itself out in American culture since the end of World War II.

Matthew Johnson's self-constructions clearly validate Hale's conclusions that this romance is a destructive force that continues to operate in contemporary America. Hale writes that:

The lure of the outsider romance is that it enables white middle-class Americans to experience at the imaginary level the social and historical connections that erode at the material level... The romance of the outsider works because it denies at the imaginary level the contradictions between the human fantasy of absolute individual autonomy and the human need for grounding in historical and contemporary social connections. It works because it enables Americans with political and economic power to disavow that power (Hale, 307-8).

Many middle-class white American men have found this narrative appealing because it allows them to disown the "political and economic power" that they clearly have due to their status as white middle-class males. In the fantasy, they are downtrodden or have romanticized obstacles in their lives that in fact do not exist. They can play pretend at being a hippie or a beatnik or a folkie or a punk, but have the option for stability, safety, and security at any time, unlike the marginalized populations they may be romanticizing as a part of their outsider romances. "The romance of the outsider perpetuates a disavowal of power that damages us all," Hale writes (10). Hale uses the failed wilderness adventurer Christopher McCandless, who served as the inspiration for the book and film *Into the Wild*, as her example for how this narrative continues to operate in contemporary America. I argue that Matthew Johnson and his work at Fat Possum is another example.

Embracing different genres of black music has been one way that white middle-class Americans have cultivated their outsider romances, with black music being "a medium whites could use to reinvent themselves" (Hale, 51). Whites saw that black artists used the blues to create their own rebel identities, which were productive for resisting racism and the humiliations of Jim Crow, and desired to get in on the action. "With their sounds and words, blues musicians created a rebel persona, a romanticized black figure who said no to hard work and yes to

personal pleasure. The blues rebel announced that transformation was possible, that individual black lives could not be contained and controlled by whites,” Hale writes in her essay “Hear Me Talking to You: Blues and the Romance of Rebellion” (239). “The blues conjured a black individual who was sexual and violent and anything but good, a black person free to be bad, with a dark (no pun intended) sense of humor, a tragic sense of life” (247). This statement of black individuality and rebellion was coopted by white audiences as a way for them to change their own identities, while forcing blues music and musicians to remain the same. For African Americans “the blues conjured the possibility of change” (239) and helped black folks imagine new possibilities during the post-Emancipation years through the development of Jim Crow law and into the mid-twentieth century. When whites later “discovered” and popularized blues, and began a romance with the blues rebel identity, they believed the blues rebel was a “‘real’ black identity, proof that African Americans—especially southern rural people ‘uncontaminated’ by modernity—lived and felt more deeply than modern whites repressed and alienated by modern life. This romance imagined stasis instead of transformation” (240). Once whites created this narrative around the blues, the music served the opposite function for black artists and listeners than it had when it originally developed. Instead of serving the need for African Americans to imagine and cope with the great social and cultural changes they were experiencing, blues provided a space for whites to negotiate change while the black artists had to remain relics of a past marked by racial discrimination, lack of education, poverty, and general inequality so that white audiences could experience a liberating rebellion. Hale writes, “Black people had to stay the same, authentic and pure, so that whites could experience transcendence, an easing of their own feelings of alienation” (240).

Karl Hagstrom Miller has identified similar themes at work in the folk revival, writing that “[b]lack music was a path to white ecstasy” (153) and that “white collectors helped make black song a safe, moving talisman for white identity” (109). Hagstrom Miller’s blues influencers “located a people’s essence in a distant historical past in which a pure, isolated culture was unsullied by outside influences” (97). These themes are obvious in Johnson’s constructions of Fat Possum’s blues as the most authentic version of the genre: the artists on his label are represented as being outside of time and tucked away from external music influences in their rural Mississippi lives. This narrative is damaging because, as Hale would argue, “dependent as it was on the idea of black difference, of blacks as more authentic and real than other Americans, the romance of the outsider could not help generate equality on an individual, psychological level... The greatest beneficiaries, in the end, were those white middle-class young people who used their attraction to blacks as the folk to transform themselves” (118).

Fat Possum marketed its music to young white fans of punk and alternative rock as a way to expose these audiences to the real, “authentic” blues. Hale and Hagstrom Miller’s findings that white audiences can use the blues to achieve transformation, as long as the artists they listen to remain locked in a static, mythic past rather than changing with history, is clear in Fat Possum’s marketing approaches. Fat Possum presents its artists’s music to young white audiences as if giving them an artifact from the past, which those listeners can use to transform their understandings of themselves and their favorite music. Fat Possum’s audience can use the label’s blues to gain a deeper understanding of the punk, grunge, and rap they already listen to, in much the same way fans during the blues and folk revival of the 1960s used blues and folk music to deepen their connection to rock and roll. Fat Possum fans can change their understandings of their own identities in the same way audiences during the blues revival did, using the authentic

rural country blues to learn about the ways poverty and racism continue to operate in the American South into the 1990s and how those conditions can lead to a pure form of expression in roots music.

Johnson exoticizes Fat Possum's artists through his record liner notes, which emphasize the weirdness and violence of Mississippi as well as the connections some of these aging bluesmen have to a past before the Civil Rights movement. In Fat Possum's offerings, the rural South is constructed as a place where the Civil Rights movement never happened, or where its benefits have not been able to reach because of how marginalized these bluesmen and the places they live are. For example in *Darker Blues*, attention is drawn to bluesman Scott Dunbar being the son of a former slave, as well as his illiteracy. The coffee table book informs readers T-Model Ford is also illiterate, and several of the label's bluesmen were former sharecroppers. These facts are foregrounded as a way to make these bluesmen seem like exotic remnants of this country's troubled past.

Several major white male blues influencers show up in Hale's book; they play into the romance of the outsider by exoticizing folk music and its connections to a historical past. Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax is a rebel for diving into dangerous, isolated southern towns to record black artists singing blues and folk music. Record collector Harry Smith differed in ideology and methodology from Lomax—the folklorists and record collectors often opposed each other's tactics for figuring out what folk music was truly authentic—but Smith, too, was a rebel for creating the radically integrated Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music. Both groups of blues influencers felt that their method for collecting this music (song collecting or record collecting) led to the most authentic portrayal of blues and folk music. Song-collecting folklorists believed that folk musicians sang the most authentic music when they were not under

pressure from commercial record labels, and could play material that would never be fit for selling on a 78rpm record when they were being recorded by a folklorist in the comfort of their own home. The very essence of the folk revival was at its heart anti-commercial and anti-capitalist—for a time folk music and some of its most famous representatives including Alan Lomax had known ties to the Communist Party, at a historical moment when such affiliations were radical and personally risky—so it makes sense that folklorists would eschew commercial records in favor of field recordings (Hale, 92-3). On the other hand, record collectors believed that folklorists often manipulated musicians in the field and did not trust field recordings to be the most accurate representations of vernacular music (Petrusich, 164). While record collectors fetishized the rarest and strangest-sounding 78s they could find—the least commercial material was the best, and the blues that were actually popular in the black community were scoffed at—they believed that artists put down their best material at commercial recording sessions when they were getting paid and being recorded on decent equipment, rather than playing for free for a folklorist who shows up at the door asking for songs.

Like Johnson, the men in both these groups conceived of themselves as rebels and outsiders. A folklorist such as Alan Lomax took journeys into southern black spaces in search of song and culture, journeys that allowed him to think of himself as giving the finger to segregation. The record collectors who made up the collective known as the Blues Mafia were famously a bunch of strange outsiders, who dealt with their various quirks through obsessive collecting and organizing (Hamilton, 221). Amanda Petrusich has even suggested that these 78rpm record collectors could have all been suffering from similar mental illnesses, as “[b]oth hoarding and collecting are often linked with obsessive-compulsive disorder and, on occasion, its

sister condition, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder” (Petrusich, 224-5).<sup>12</sup> By positioning himself as a rebel, Matthew Johnson ironically created parallels between himself and the figures from blues history he scoffed at in interviews. Like the folklorists, Johnson rebelled by crossing color lines in order to “discover” black blues musicians in mostly black rural southern spaces. Like the 78 collectors, he believed commercial music was superior to field recordings and presented his representation of the blues as the most authentic one, positioning himself as an outsider to both the blues establishment and the music industry at large in order to leverage that authenticity.

Marybeth Hamilton argues that the most important figures in the history of the blues have been not the musicians themselves, but the white folklorists, blues historians, and record collectors who have shaped the genre. As Elijah Wald has similarly stated, Hamilton points out that the most well-known and venerated blues artists are not ones who sold the most records to the black communities for which they played. “The voices of Johnson, House, Patton, and James were pushed to the foreground not by black record buyers, but by more elusive mediators and shapers of taste” (Hamilton, 9). The fact that those names are now considered the most famous and well-regarded Delta bluesmen shows how white taste has ultimately shaped the genre into what it is today. Filene agrees that the “cultural brokers” or “middlemen” throughout history have had a key role in shaping our contemporary and historical understandings of folk music, with their influence being often hidden or ignored. “I want to call attention to these brokers as active agents. They have remained largely unrecognized, partly because of historians’ inattention and partly because they themselves strove to cloak their power. Eager to promote the authenticity

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<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Hale examines how mental illness functions within the romance of the outsider paradigm, concluding that the romance tends to only exacerbate mental illness, particularly among women attempting to fit in to the man-shaped rebel framework (43-8).

of the performers they worked with, the middlemen depicted themselves simply as cultural funnels channeling the musicians' raw, elemental power to popular audiences" (6).

Matthew Johnson mediated and shaped the music and visual presentation of Fat Possum's artists, emphasizing particular markers of authenticity in order to appeal to a young white audience. Rather than allowing blues artists to represent themselves and their art how they wish, the blues has throughout history been filtered through the interpretations of cultural brokers. These mediators do not allow for the voices of the black musicians to come through in interpreting their own cultural productions. Johnson's work at Fat Possum is continuous with these themes, as he sought to assert the label's artists as the best and the last representations of the blues available in 1990s Mississippi. Part of achieving that goal involved romanticizing the positive and negative aspects of the poor, black, rural, southern lives of Fat Possum's artists, as well as situating them as the last of their kind, playing a dying genre of music, living and creating in a space left behind by progress.

While folklorists, the Blues Mafia, scholars, and Johnson went about maintaining blues' authenticity in different ways, they all exoticized the southern black male musicians who created and performed the blues as a way to assert the music's realness. This resulted in the creation of a particular type of rural southern black masculinity associated with blues performers, one viewed as necessary in order for one to be an authentic blues musician. This blues masculinity, explored in depth in the previous chapter, is black, poor, violent, sad, angry, unpredictable, oppressed, and left in the past or somehow lost to time. As James McInerney notes in his *New Yorker* profile of the label, "Fat Possum artists seem to share a background of sharecropping, illiteracy, poverty, alcohol abuse, and prison time." All of these characteristics must be present in order for a blues musician to be authentic, and authenticity is so important in blues that by the mid-twentieth

century, it seems to have become necessary for success due to the constructs created by white male blues influencers.

Sociologist Charles Keil was one of the first scholars to note that blues influencers seemed to ignore the vibrant and active blues scenes that still attracted large black audiences, such as the urban blues venues in 1960s Chicago where he did his fieldwork. Keil used the term “moldy figs” to refer to blues scholars, including Samuel Charters, Paul Oliver, Harold Courlander, Harry Oster, Mack McCormick, Pete Welding, and Alan Lomax, who favored certain stereotypes of rural southern black masculinity to be sure a blues artist was “authentic” (34). Matthew Johnson would have likely included these names in the list of his disgusted “folklorists and musicologists,” but when Keil breaks down what the “moldy figs” desire in a bluesmen, the traits are similar to what Fat Possum emphasizes in its musicians. The first is authenticity: “first and foremost is a quest for the ‘real’ blues” (34). Next is, “Old age: the performer should preferably be more than sixty years old, blind, arthritic, and toothless” (34-5). Most of Fat Possum’s bluesmen were well past middle-aged, and emphasis was placed on old age and connections to a distant historical past whenever possible in the label’s marketing. Next Keil lists, “Obscurity: the blues singer should not have performed in public or have made a recording in at least twenty years; among deceased bluesmen, the best seem to be those who appeared in a big city one day in the 1920’s, made from four to six recordings, and then disappeared into the countryside forever” (35). Fat Possum’s two most famous artists, R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough, can fall into this category, as both made obscure recordings many years before being signed to Fat Possum but otherwise barely left the hill country. The last two criteria the moldy figs prefer are, “Correct tutelage: the singer should have played with or been taught by some legendary figure,” and, “Agrarian milieu: a bluesman should have lived the

bulk of his life as a sharecropper, coaxing mules and picking cotton, uncontaminated by city influences” (35). These narratives were presented in Fat Possum’s marketing when possible, as sharecropping, farm work, and general rural isolation were discussed often in liner notes, and R.L. Burnside’s learning the blues from Mississippi Fred McDowell was a favorite story. Keil’s moldy fig concept is useful for identifying the type of black masculinity fetishized by blues influencers, and for seeing how Johnson fit so easily into a stereotype he claimed to despise.

To garner white interest in blues music, blues influencers constructed a blues masculinity based on familiar stereotypes about black men and additionally created a historiography of rock and roll that placed the blues at the foundation of America’s popular music. These techniques proved highly successful with the white rock and roll audience of the 1960s. Rock musicians from this era praised blues musicians for laying the foundations of their craft, which led to the blues revival during that decade. This helped the blues gain a young white audience of rock and roll fans, which soon made up much of the genre’s fan base. Fat Possum engaged very similar tactics to appeal to a new generation of young white rock and roll fans by situating the hill country artists on the label as being the roots of punk and rap music. Johnson examined this family tree in his liner notes for *Not the Same Old Blues Crap II*. “There was a time in America, in the 1920s and 1930s, when the biggest entertainers were blues performers who deliberately projected dangerous reputations,” Johnson wrote. “Rock and roll began to lose its edge and made the British Invasion possible. They shortened it to rock. When rock began to wander, punk was there. Punk gave way to alternative and alternative music to grunge.” He concluded that rock has survived because it has been able to evolve, while the blues was forced to atrophy by “the ridiculous committees, the cheesy clubs.” In these liner notes, Johnson failed to recognize

himself as being one of “the ridiculous committees, the cheesy clubs,” engaging in the very tactics that have caused the genre to atrophy.

Matthew Johnson’s rebellious persona helped to disguise this. Fat Possum’s marketing of its artists as hard-core and living on the edge made most 1990s punk rockers look tame in comparison, and argued convincingly for that type of blues as the roots of punk music. As label head, Johnson constructed himself as someone who young punks should trust as an authority on music. “Sardonic and dyspeptic, his conversation liberally strewn with expletives, Johnson is the living embodiment of punk rock blues attitude,” wrote one journalist (Gill). “It gave Johnson great pleasure to outrage the ‘blues geeks’, as he calls them, but that wasn’t his motivation. Johnson was also looking for a way to make the blues relevant to a young audience, by framing its essential feeling in a modern context,” wrote another (Grant). “When I met Johnson, seven years ago, I was morbidly fascinated by his southern gallows humor and by the chaos of his personal life; his primary interests, besides the blues, were barmaids, firearms, trucks, no-name vodka, and the kind of drugs that can keep you up for three days,” wrote McInerney. Profile after profile of Johnson portrayed him as “dishevelled, hard-drinking, fiercely iconoclastic,” a character ripped from a Barry Hannah story (Grant). Anarchy, a term embraced by the punk movement and found in Robert Palmer’s writings about R.L. Burnside, was invoked as an aspect of Johnson’s character. “This seems to be what really attracts Johnson to these blues-makers—this spirit of anarchy, which he also finds in modern-day pop nihilists like Kid Rock and Eminem. It’s a spirit that Johnson himself comes by honestly,” (McInerney). This was someone a fan of punk music could trust to shape their tastes, as journalists insisted he was the real deal, as authentic as the artists on his label.

In her portrait of Blues Mafia leader James McKune, Hamilton played up the outsider persona that Hale critiqued. McKune was portrayed as being a rebellious outsider, a persona likely fueled by mental illness that resulted in his homelessness and eventually his brutal murder in New York City. “McKune dedicated his life to finding a blues voice that was intense, raw, and defiantly marginal, and he ended his days as a homeless, friendless wanderer, dying in circumstances as violent, mysterious and sexually charged as Robert Johnson himself,” (Hamilton, 197). “Intense, raw, and defiantly marginal” would be a good way to describe the artists on Fat Possum; Johnson, too, inhabited that lifestyle in his role as tastemaker. Because he lived this outsider narrative, he presented himself as being able to understand and market Fat Possum’s artists as the real thing.

In embracing commercial recordings over folklore, Johnson made a similar statement as did the 78rpm record collectors studied by Hamilton. The members of the record-collecting group known as the Blues Mafia believed that commercial recording revealed the most authentic blues, under the assumption that the artists were recording what they wanted to play and their audiences wanted to hear. These record collectors believed that folklorists coerced artists they recorded, which was sometimes true, and so field recordings could not be trusted to provide an honest picture of blues music.<sup>13</sup> Though the Blues Mafiosi listened to commercially recorded blues released by record labels on 78rpm records, one could not accuse them of having a preference for “commercial” music. Hamilton writes that McKune was on the search for “battered records by obscure musicians whose names you would certainly never have heard” (202). McKune saw himself as a tastemaker who knew better than everyone else, and the more rare and bizarre and difficult-to-hear the blues 78 was, the more praise it got. When McKune had

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<sup>13</sup> See the often-cited anecdote of the interaction between John Lomax and Nashville prisoner Black Sampson, Hagstrom Miller, pp. 262

a job in a record shop in a black neighborhood, he developed a “gut-level aversion to race records,” dismissing anything anybody else, black or white, liked (204). Hamilton describes McKune as “an eccentric iconoclast who took many guises—a wizard, a prophet, a lunatic” (210). Matthew Johnson shared with McKune these personality traits and a belief that commercial records are superior to folklore field recordings. Johnson emphasized how Fat Possum and its artists were more concerned with making money by selling their music to the “kids” as a way to distance himself from the project of folklore. “...Yes it is solely about money. I’m very proud to say that. Otherwise it becomes like a folklore thing,” he said in response to a question about his artists’ motivation (Konig).

While he has much in common with the record collectors known as the Blues Mafia, Johnson’s attempt to distance himself from folklorists is almost comical given how similar his work is to some of the most famous song collectors in blues history. In various interviews Johnson reiterates his distaste for the work of folklorists, and Fat Possum even sued the University of Memphis over the rights to Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside’s early folklore recordings by David Evans. “‘These folklorists want to lock up these blues guys and treat them like rats in a lab,’ Johnson says of the University of Memphis project. His ultimate goal is to bring the music to ‘the kids’—those who make up the majority of the record-buying public,” wrote McInerney. “The last thing I want to be is a folklorist and record records that no one will listen to,” Johnson continued. In another article Johnson asserts, “But we’re not some kind of purists making field recordings. This is rockin’ stuff; this music gets people moving. The stuff that purists go for is just garbage to me” (Drozdowski). In almost all profiles of Johnson, he seeks to distance himself from folklorists and “blues geeks” by creating an irreverent persona

and insisting that the work he's doing is not only different from, but better than, everyone else in the blues community (McInerney, Grant).

A look at the relationship between the most famous folklorist of the twentieth century, John Lomax, and his protégé Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter reveals how similar Johnson is to the iconic ethnomusicologist, despite his professed hatred for the work of folklore. The Ledbetter-Lomax relationship has been examined extensively by historians, but it is worth reexamining here given the parallels between that relationship and Johnson's relationships with the artists on his label.<sup>14</sup>

In 1933, John Lomax met the seasoned performer known as Lead Belly during a visit to the Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana. Hagstrom Miller writes how the prison location functioned for song collectors like Lomax as a space they could construct as being unsullied by contact with popular music forms, and a place where Lomax could use his whiteness to force black prisoners to record for him. Hagstrom Miller provides one anecdote in which Lomax coerced an inmate at Nashville Penitentiary named Black Sampson into recording songs the religious Sampson believed were "sinful." Lomax used the warden to get the material he wanted out of Sampson. "Isolation from popular music and white influences, Lomax believed, made black prisoners ideal repositories and creators of authentic folk songs," Hagstrom Miller writes. But, the truth was, "Lomax was able to collect songs in southern prisons because black inmates, far from isolated from white influence, were under constant white supervision and control" (261-2).

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<sup>14</sup> My sources for the history of the Lead Belly and John Lomax relationship include: *Segregating Sound*, Karl Hagstrom Miller; *Staging the Blues*, Paige McGinley; *In Search of the Blues*, Marybeth Hamilton; *Romancing the Folk*, Benjamin Filene; and *A Nation of Outsiders*, Grace Hale

Ledbetter was serving time for murder, and had a huge repertoire of music including folk, blues, and popular material. Lomax constructed a story that Ledbetter was released from prison after serenading the governor of Louisiana, though historians have revealed this to be inaccurate. This story was repeated (and reenacted on film) so frequently that Ledbetter's prison time and violent past became what made him famous to Northern audiences, to the extent that Lomax forced Ledbetter to perform in a prison uniform. "At the same time, though, that the Lomaxes ennobled Lead Belly as an authentic folk forefather, they thoroughly exoticized him," Filene writes. "Their publicity campaign depicted him as a savage, untamed animal and focused endlessly on his convict past" (59). Hagstrom Miller writes that the reception of Ledbetter by New York audiences "was deeply shaped by minstrel stereotypes of black male violence and primitivism" (242). Hamilton writes that Lead Belly was for Lomax, "a living, breathing musical artifact, a black voice that was uncorrupted and pure" (78). These scholars express how Lomax helped reduce Leadbelly to an object for white audiences to marvel at, to consume and interpret in line with stereotypes about black men they already were familiar with. Similar ideas are at play in the way Fat Possum portrays the musicians on the label. In echoing how John Lomax constructed an image of Lead Belly, Fat Possum is repeating a formula that has historically been highly successful in selling folk music. "Regardless of the inaccuracies in their portrayal, the Lomaxes' emphasis on Lead Belly's 'Otherness' seems to have been strikingly effective," writes Filene, noting that Lead Belly played before sold-out audiences in New York City (62).

While Ledbetter and Lomax used each other to make money from their unusual partnership, Lomax remained in control. Hagstrom Miller emphasizes how Lomax curated Ledbetter's sets, not allowing the musician to play "both commercial tunes and songs associated with white artists or composers" (245). Ledbetter's favorite song was a Gene Autry tune, "Silver

Haired Daddy,” which Lomax refused to allow him to perform (246). Theater scholar Paige McGinley has also explored this dynamic of Lomax’s control over Ledbetter’s performances, noting that Ledbetter was a passionate dancer but Lomax would not allow him to dance in his shows. “Lead Belly’s expertise as a dancer belied the myth on which John Lomax depended—that of the instinctive, untutored Lead Belly, whose musical gifts were a supposedly natural outgrowth of his blackness, of incarceration, of forced labor” (91). McGinley also points to Lomax as the controlling figure of the partnership whose dedication to presenting Ledbetter as a prisoner shaped Ledbetter’s performances more than the artist’s own choices. “The most controversial point of contention is well known: Ledbetter did not want to wear his prison clothes on stage. Nor did he want to stop dancing on stage, or restrict his repertoire to blues, work songs, and field hollers” (111).

Fat Possum has its own fascination with the prison, specifically Mississippi’s notorious Parchman Farm. Johnson and Fat Possum envision prison time as something that bolsters a bluesman’s authenticity, like Lomax promoting Lead Belly, they emphasize the prison in discussing the artists on the label. R.L. Burnside and T-Model Ford both served time at Parchman Farm for murder, and these stories are endlessly repeated in journalism pieces on Fat Possum as well as in *Darker Blues* and the documentary *Can You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen*. The liner notes on records from the artists take care to mention this as well, so consumers know they are picking up an album by an authentic Mississippi bluesman who has done his requisite time in prison. While Johnson does not go to prisons to collect songs, the prison location is still used to represent the violence of Mississippi, enabling parallels between Fat Possum’s bluesmen and older icons such as Lead Belly, granting them a position in a lineage of bluesmen who have been to prison in general and Parchman specifically. Burnside

has been questioned about his prison sentence so frequently that he uses a similar humorous reply when repeatedly discussing it with journalists. His standard response, “I shot him, him dying was between him and the Lord,” is repeated in various interviews and in *Can You See Me Laughin'*. In *Darker Blues* and the rest of Fat Possum’s productions, if the artist has any prison time in his past, it is emphasized.

Johnson also mirrors Lomax in his paternalism towards the artists he works with. In his *New Yorker* profile, McInerney draws direct parallels between Johnson’s dealings with his artists and the sharecropping system that once dominated Mississippi. “Johnson’s role is that of the patriarch—alternately cajoling and berating, doling out money and threatening to withhold it. It’s a role that he and his artists, as Mississippians, seem to be comfortable with.” In *Can You See Me Laughin'*, Johnson is shown helping T-Model Ford move into a new home; his previous trailer was rotted to the point of being dangerous to live in. Johnson constantly argued with Burnside over the musician’s Social Security payments, which Burnside technically should not have been qualifying for given his income from music. Johnson admonishes Burnside for still trying to get the monthly government checks, an anecdote that is repeated in the documentary and the *New Yorker* article. In an article in *The Guardian*, Johnson’s paternalism towards his artists is again raised, as he discusses how he would like to get Ford to move away from his home in Greenville in the Delta. “‘T-Model Ford got robbed for 2,000 dollars the other day,’ says Johnson. ‘Then someone threw a brick through his window. Then the 88-year-old white woman who was teaching him how to read and write got raped and beaten to death. This all went down in Greenville (Mississippi), which is one of the worst shitholes in America for violence and crack and degenerate goddamn madness. We’d like to get T-Model out of there but he won’t leave.’” In this interview, Johnson not only emphasizes the southern gothic vision of Mississippi that Fat

Possum uses to sell its bluesmen's records, but also describes a relationship in which he would like to be able to get Ford to move to a different location.

In histories of the relationship between John Lomax and Lead Belly, Lomax is often (rightfully) presented as a paternalistic white southern patriarch who becomes confused and upset when his black charge does not cooperate with him or properly appreciate all the favors Lomax has done for him. When Lomax brought Lead Belly to New York to perform for northern audiences, Lead Belly immediately began having a good time in Harlem, much to Lomax's chagrin. "The sight of Leadbelly returning the next morning, drunk, disheveled, and euphoric... convinced Lomax that extreme measures were necessary," Hamilton writes (118). Lomax became increasingly agitated by the artist's misbehavior, alleging that Ledbetter was often intoxicated and repeatedly threatened Lomax for money, and he eventually sent Ledbetter home on a one-way train back south. Just as Lead Belly pushed back against Lomax by singing what he wanted, passing a hat for tips during his performances to make more money than Lomax was willing to pay him, and demanding payment at knife point, Burnside and Ford find ways to resist Johnson's paternalism. Burnside continues to draw his Social Security and Ford keeps living in Greenville.

For a label headed by someone who hates folklore so much, Fat Possum has released a lot of field recordings. Johnson has repeatedly made clear his negative opinion of folklore, folklorists, and field recordings, but Fat Possum has available for purchase a forty-five volume set of folklorist George Mitchell's fieldwork, which focuses on music Mitchell recorded in the late 1960s in the Mississippi hill country. These records are available in the complete George Mitchell boxed set, and some of the material is sold on individual records if one cannot afford to pay two hundred dollars for the whole set. There are two notable things about these records, first

is that they exist on Fat Possum's roster at all, given Johnson's beliefs about the work of folklorists, and second, that these records are presented in a very different manner from Fat Possum's other releases.

Of the folklorists and fans that swarmed southwards in the 1960s blues revival looking to record authentic blues, George Mitchell is the best fit for Fat Possum. His work is best known for trips taken to the Mississippi hill country in 1967 and 1968 that resulted in landmark recordings of Otha Turner, Jessie Mae Hemphill, R.L. Burnside, and Mississippi Fred McDowell. Mitchell recorded not just music, but also in-depth oral histories and took photographs. Mitchell published two books of photography and oral history from those trips; *Blow My Blues Away*, which came from his master's thesis and was published in 1971, and *Mississippi Hill Country Blues 1967*, a more curated version of that work published in 2013. These documents are treasures for fans of hill country blues, which was never as well-documented or researched or fetishized as Delta blues. Mitchell was the first person to record R.L. Burnside, and the other musicians are a part of the musical heritage of the bluesmen Fat Possum would later release. It would make perfect sense for Fat Possum to issue these records, if Johnson did not so vehemently hate folklore.

Mitchell is described in the liner notes to *The George Mitchell Collection* as being an untrained folklorist, someone who worked on gut instinct rather than formal training, and a southerner by birth who could be better trusted by his southern informants than the northerners from Ivy League colleges that were coming south looking for roots music at the time. "Most folklorists are not the people you would want to spend your time with... Most are obsessed with ingratiating themselves with Southern culture, but none of them listen to hip-hop, the only living form of Southern blues," Sam Sweet wrote. "George Mitchell isn't a folklorist. He didn't use a methodology when he recorded the lives and music of people in Mississippi, Alabama, and

Georgia. He didn't have the best interview skills. He wasn't an equipment specialist, and a lot of his recordings are rough around the edges. He's not good with dates. And yet, Mitchell amassed a body of work that has more warmth and personality than any other field recordings from his, or any other, era." Though Mitchell might not have trained in a graduate folklore program, he still was doing folklore work in the field, and he was advised by none other than David Evans for his trips to the Mississippi hill country (*Blow My Blues Away*, xii). Why Johnson would see Mitchell's folklore work as so good he rises above the ranks of being a folklorist and Evans as someone who deserves to be sued for keeping bluesmen "like rats in a lab" is uncertain.

The George Mitchell records are presented in a completely different style from Fat Possum's other releases. The cover of the complete set is a black-and-white photo by Mitchell (who has gone on to become a renowned photographer) of several black men sitting on boxes listening to and playing music. Only one man has an acoustic guitar, while the others appear to be either singing or listening. They are dressed in old-fashioned work clothes; dirty boots, caps, flannels. Inside the booklet accompanying the set, are more black-and-white photos of George Mitchell doing his fieldwork in the Mississippi hill country in 1967. There is a photograph of him on Otha Turner's farm in Como riding a horse. There is a photograph of him sitting on a front porch in Senatobia with Rosa Lee Hill. These musicians are hill country royalty, and Mitchell looks like a curious beatnik. Mitchell was not the first or only folklorist to document hill country music, but his use of oral history and his Georgia background helped him compile what many consider the best documentation on hill country music from this era. In the notes accompanying the boxed set, each artist Mitchell recorded gets a page that details the year and place they were recorded and gives a short biography as well as remembrances of their recording sessions from Mitchell. These biographies are written in a different style than the short bios that

appear in the Fat Possum liner notes authored by Matthew Johnson and Robert Palmer. They are straightforward and dry in comparison, with no hyperbole and few violent anecdotes. The reader is given a simple description of the artist's instrumental style and how their work was influenced by place. Idiosyncrasies, poverty, superstition, and the prison appear as one would expect in a blues story, but the narrative style is straightforward and documentary rather than ecstatic and experimental.

The discs on this collection were also released by Fat Possum individually, so one would not have to purchase the entire set to hear R.L. Burnside's first recordings, for example. These separate versions were also marketed in a distinct way from Fat Possum's other products; it would be possible to pick one of these records up and assume it was released by one of Fat Possum's rival reissue-focused blues labels that Johnson spends so much time disparaging. In fact, George Mitchell's field recordings have also been released on labels including Arhoolie, Rounder, and Revival. *The George Mitchell Collection* albums have a photograph of the artist by the folklorist on the front and back, with a color filter put over the black-and-white to stylize it a little. Usually two colors are chosen for each record, for example on the Fred McDowell and Johnny Woods album the photography and liner notes are all in blue and yellow, more eye-catching than black-and-white would be. The notes are an anecdote from Mitchell's fieldwork about when he recorded McDowell and Woods. No boasting from Johnson, no southern gothic imagery, the records from this collection are all presented in a similar way, like a fairly traditional folklore recording. On the notes to *R.L. Burnside First Recordings*, we get some of Johnson discussing Burnside's unique personality and why these recordings are important to Fat Possum history, but even here he is more restrained than in other Fat Possum liner notes.

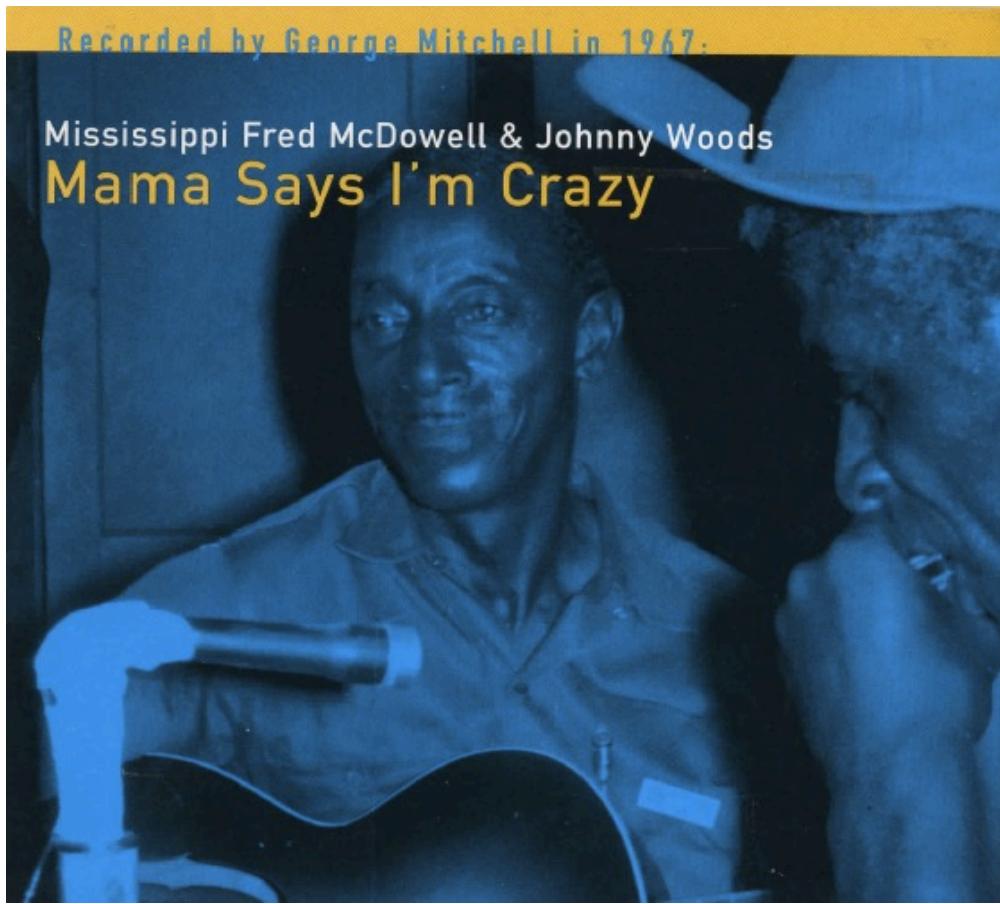


Figure 11. Mississippi Fred McDowell & Johnny Woods, *Mama Says I'm Crazy*, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

So what made Johnson have an about-face on folklore recordings? Mitchell did some unique and interesting field work that is certainly relevant to Fat Possum and Fat Possum's fans, but for his vitriolic hatred of folklore it seems odd that Johnson would go so far as to release an extensive series of old blues records recorded in the field. The Sam Sweet liner notes to the complete boxed set are used to construct Mitchell as someone so good he is too good to be tarnished by the term "folklorist," but one cannot deny that field recordings is what these records are. Though Johnson said releasing folklore recordings was the "last thing" he would want to do and referred to those records as "garbage," Fat Possum is among other blues labels reissuing

folklore recordings, another way Johnson and the label share commonalities with the blues establishment Johnson claims to hate.

If one were to listen to Matthew Johnson, one would believe that blues music is dead. Johnson constantly repeats that he believes the genre is over, that the bluesmen on Fat Possum are the very last of a dying breed. Because he is there on location recording them, Johnson positions himself as the authority on what is left of the blues. “Basically the blues was dying when we started and now it's over,” says Johnson in his *Guardian* profile (Grant). “It's all dead,” he asserts in another interview (Gill).

Blues influencers have been declaring that the blues is dead for as long as the genre has been alive. Johnson’s adaptation of “the blues is dead” philosophy helps situate him as the foremost expert on the genre, with access to the oldest and last practitioners of the art form. As far back as the earliest British ballad collectors, folk music traditions have been conceptualized as in the process of dying out or already extinct. Nineteenth century ballad hunter Francis James Child, one of the earliest folklore figures interested in documenting folk music traditions, “felt that although in premodern times the ballad had been a ‘common treasure’ passed on orally and enjoyed by all, it was now a long-dead art” (Filene, 12). This belief resulted in song collecting among folklorists becoming a “cultural salvage mission” rather than an observance of a contemporary and vibrant tradition (64). These constructs created the demand that folk musicians remain static representations of the past and an endless line of musicians being presented as the “last” one able to authentically perform in a given folk tradition. Johnson fails to recognize how this mentality has lead to the fossilization of blues music because the genre has been pronounced dead, rather than being allowed to evolve the way he describes that rock and roll has. As Filene

points out through his analysis of Muddy Waters's career, "being the heir of an obsolete style is an inherently confining role" (120).

This blues mythology regarding the death of the genre that Johnson invokes relates to the other narratives explored in this chapter. By portraying aging artists as remnants of a more authentic past and by claiming, as a self-styled authority, that the blues is "all dead," Johnson can assert that he has recorded the very last of Mississippi's legendary bluesmen. Fat Possum's musicians become "heir[s] of an obsolete style" that will die as soon as their aged bodies and hard lives catch up with them. There is no point in anyone else trying to make blues records, because Fat Possum has already wrapped up the end of the genre.

Fat Possum titles its compilations, *Not the Same Old Blues Crap*. In some ways that claim is accurate, as Johnson's quest to market aging blues musicians to young music fans in the 1990s resulted in some of the most interesting blues records made in the past few decades. The connections drawn between blues and punk and blues and rap offer a fresh perspective on the genre—and a needed one given that blues continues to serve as the roots of most of American popular music. Where Fat Possum achieved originality in its records, the label's marketing and Matthew Johnson's rebel persona as a white blues influencer echo blues history. The label's artists are endlessly stereotyped into a violent black masculinity, their rural location is emphasized as being removed from tarnishing contemporary influences, and Matthew Johnson positions himself as an outsider figure to support his reputation as a tastemaker doing it better than everyone else. Johnson interprets the blues for his audiences and capitalizes on tired notions of authenticity in the same way his forebears did. While Fat Possum should be celebrated for its originality and the talented artists the label recorded, much of the same old blues crap is indeed present in the label's work.

## CONCLUSION

### NOT THE SAME OLD BLUES CRAP?

As of this writing, in the spring of 2018, Fat Possum Records is no longer known as strictly a blues label, or much of a blues label at all. The bluesmen I have discussed in this thesis have all passed away, the most recent death being that of Cedell Davis in September of 2017 at age 91 (Pareles). It is fitting that Davis, who seemed as though he could withstand any ailment or calamity, survived the longest. Junior Kimbrough was killed by a heart attack in January 1998 at age 67 (Pareles). R.L. Burnside passed away in September 2005 at age 78 (Sisario). Fat Possum does not release new blues records by artists from the Mississippi hill country or elsewhere anymore. The label has not released a record of new blues material in over ten years. R.L. Burnside's last record of new material, *A Bothered Mind*, was released in 2004, the year before his death. Paul "Wine" Jones's record *Stop Arguing Over Me* was posthumously released in 2006, a year after his death. The most recent blues album put out by Fat Possum is the 2008 record *Gonna Get Old Someday* from the Bentonia-based bluesman Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, which was released through the subsidiary label Big Legal Mess Records. Fat Possum's current efforts are focused on a combination of blues reissues and compilations, and new records by indie rock bands of various genres. If one trusted Matthew Johnson's rhetoric that the Mississippi blues are dead, we might believe that the deaths of the Fat Possum bluesmen represent the end of the genre, and hence the label has had to switch gears out of necessity. We of course know better than to trust Johnson or anyone who claims that a music genre is dead.

There are prominent hill country blues artists, including many descendants of the Kimbroughs and Burnsides, that have active music careers and it seems would make natural candidates for being signed to Fat Possum's roster if the label had not pivoted towards indie rock.<sup>15</sup> R.L. Burnside's grandson Cedric Burnside, who cut his teeth playing drums touring with his grandfather from his young teens, has had great success with his duo the Cedric Burnside Project. The band features himself on drums and Trenton Ayers, the son of Junior Kimbrough's original bassist and hill country bluesman in his own right Little Joe Ayers, on guitar. The pair are hill country royalty, and their aptly titled record *Descendants of Hill Country* was Grammy-nominated. Several of Junior Kimbrough's sons have music careers, including Robert Kimbrough Sr., David Malone, and Kent Kimbrough.<sup>16</sup> Sharde Thomas, the granddaughter of beloved fife and drum musician Otha Turner, was mentored in the fife and drum tradition by her grandfather from the time she was in grade school and is now one of the only practitioners of this archaic pre-blues form that is closely linked with the Mississippi hill country. Thomas maintains a steady performing and recording schedule in addition to school and work. She is an example of another performer who would seem to be a good fit for Fat Possum's brand, had they chosen to remain a Mississippi blues label.

Instead Fat Possum has turned toward releasing an eclectic mix of rock bands and has foregone their prior attachment to Mississippi as a place, though they still sell t-shirts with their name and the phrase "Mi\$\$i\$\$ippi, born to party, forced to work." Most recently, they have acquired the cult favorite oddball alternative rock duo Royal Trux, as the formerly married

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<sup>15</sup> See *Living Blues* no. 189 and no. 253 for information on the lives and careers of the active hill country musicians mentioned here.

<sup>16</sup> Various children of Junior Kimbrough have pursued litigation against Fat Possum and Matthew Johnson over their father's estate, so it makes sense they would not work with the label professionally. See Gorman, Jeff D. "Blues Singer's Children Out of Luck on Estate."

couple has reunited after a fifteen-year split and are set to release a new album on Fat Possum in 2019. The label will also reissue the band's entire back catalogue. The most recent release from Fat Possum is Soccer Mommy, the solo project of a white twenty-year-old Nashville-based singer/songwriter named Sophie Allison. Her debut album *Clean* is being praised for maintaining her DIY intimacy while tackling bigger themes with better equipment than her previous Bandcamp-released bedroom tapes. Allison has been lauded by outlets including the *New York Times* as being a woman who is helping "save" rock and roll ("Soccer Mommy"). Another upcoming release in 2018 is the self-titled album by the English oddballs Insecure Men, who are an offshoot of the garage punk band Fat White Family, also a Fat Possum group. Insecure Men are described as a blend of exotica, easy listening, lounge music, and pop. The band's frontman Saul Adamczewski was kicked out of the Fat White Family after going on a drug binge, and now says that Insecure Men is what keeps him sober ("Insecure Men"). The closest thing to blues that Fat Possum has released recently is the sophomore album *Résistance* by the Malian band Songhoy Blues, which came out in mid-2017. The record features a guest appearance from Iggy Pop and a danceable single influenced by soul-blues titled "Bamako." The song is named after the capital of Mali and praises that city's vibrant nightlife, a counter narrative to what is commonly heard about Africa in the rest of the world (Blstein).

Over the past year and into summer 2018, Fat Possum is in the process of releasing another extensive collection of folklore recordings similar to the George Mitchell Collection discussed in Chapter 3. *Worried Blues* is a ten-album set being released in collaboration with Amazon's Prime Music. These field recordings were made between 1963 and 1972 by blues scholar Gene Rosenthal, who would later found Adelphi Records, with assistance from John Fahey. Some of these recordings saw limited release on Adelphi, but the *Worried Blues*

collection is the first time most of these songs have been released to the public. Ten artists are featured on the ten-volume set of mostly new material. Blues fans get new songs by R.L. Burnside, Reverend Gary Davis, Honeyboy Edwards, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, Furry Lewis, Little Brother Montgomery, Houston Stackhouse, Bukka White, and Reverend Robert Wilkins. These recordings have been praised by scholars for their musical variety. Even though all the artists were from central and northern Mississippi, they each have unique styles. Music historian Elijah Wald wrote the liner notes for the albums, each of which have cover artwork very similar to the George Mitchell Collection. Regardless of Matthew Johnson's feelings about folklore work and field recordings, Fat Possum must have found some success with the George Mitchell Collection albums and boxed set if the label is choosing to release another collection of similar material. Perhaps now, in 2018, the fans that were edgy young punks in the 1990s have aged into dreaded "blues geeks" that can appreciate field recordings.

Fat Possum was not the only record label that released hill country blues music during the 1990s and early 2000s. Other labels released albums by artists including Otha Turner and Jessie Mae Hemphill during that time even as Fat Possum received the most attention, in part because of their outrageous marketing approaches. Albums such as Turner's *Everybody Hollering Goat* (2001) and Hemphill's *Dare You to Do It Again* (2004) show how other hill country blues was marketed at this time, both with and without the problematic tropes that have been discussed in this thesis. The cover of *Everybody Hollering Goat* is a black-and-white photograph of Turner playing the fife, surrounded by his drum line. The title of the record is a reference to the late-summer goat picnics that have been held at the Turner family farm for decades. A goat is barbecued through the night to be made into sandwiches that are sold at the picnic the next day, while blues and fife and drum music are played and people from the surrounding rural

communities gather to listen to the master musicians. These parties are still held today, although thanks to attention brought by recordings of Turner by Alan Lomax and Bill Ferris the crowd has become more interracial and the vibe of the event more observational and less participatory in recent years. The liner notes for *Everybody Hollering Goat* by Robert Gordon describe one of these goat picnics, how Turner became the patriarch of the fife and drum tradition in north Mississippi, and the connections this proto-blues style has to African music.

The album was recorded live by north Mississippi musician Luther Dickinson at various hill country picnics on Turner's farm in Tate County between 1992 and 1997, similar to a folklore field recording. The record was released on Birdman Records, an independent label based in San Francisco that is not dedicated to blues releases but focuses on eclectic music by underground artists that would be ignored by major labels. This release shows how hill country music from the time period I examine can be marketed in a respectful way. The liner notes emphasize rural isolation, but no one is made into a southern gothic freak, there is no violence, and problematic stereotypes are avoided. Turner is depicted as a highly respected figure in his community and his position as mentor to other musicians is highlighted. This comparison leaves us with some lingering questions. Up front I want to point out that fife and drum music is much more obscure than blues, and no album of live fife and drum tunes over an hour long is going to be a top-seller, so comparing it to blues records is not completely fair. Still this record begs the question, if Fat Possum had signed Otha Turner and his Rising Star Fife and Drum Band, would they have marketed his music in this way? If Fat Possum had marketed the bluesmen they signed more like Birdman did Otha Turner, would their releases have gained as much attention?

Jessie Mae Hemphill's 2004 record *Dare You to Do It Again* is another alternative example, although here we see some of the bad(wo)man tropes used by Fat Possum being

invoked by another record label. It is worth noting again that none of Fat Possum's blues artists were women, although in the hill country tradition there have long been women participating actively in the music of these family-centered scenes as discussed in Chapter 1. The cover is a sepia-toned photograph of Hemphill, the granddaughter of fife and drum patriarch Sid Hemphill, sitting with a cigarette in one hand and a pistol in the other. She is wearing her signature cowboy hat and boots, dressed like a frontier outlaw, and the title of the album tells us all we need to know about what happens to the poor fool who messes with her twice.

The album was recorded live at a farm outside Como, Mississippi in the heart of the Mississippi hill country and features a mix of fife and drum music as well as bluesy spirituals. Once a masterful multi-instrumentalist, a stroke suffered in 1993 rendered Hemphill unable to play guitar, but she could still beat the drum with her good hand. Jimbo Mathis sets the scene with his liner notes, describing "kudzu-cloaked hills" and the "alcohol fueled juke joint throw down." Hemphill is "Queen of the Guitar Boogie...in a leopard skin cowboy hat." This sounds like Fat Possum, but this record was released by the short-lived New Orleans-based label 219 Records. It was Jessie Mae Hemphill's last release before she died in 2006. Hemphill was devoutly religious at the time of this album's recording. She only plays fife and drum music and blues-styled spirituals on the record, no straight blues. In her contribution to the liner notes, she thanks God and Jesus for the various divine miracles she has received in her life. The album concludes with a very Fat Possum-esque electronic remix, "Porch Logic Remix" by DJ Logic, which incorporates various sounds from the record, including Hemphill's rough, infectious laugh. What did Hemphill think of being marketed like a blues badwoman? Did she see herself as the figure audiences see on the cover of this record? Why would 219 Records attach a title and

cover photograph like this on an album of spiritual songs and fife and drum material? Could the same reasons I have found behind Fat Possum's marketing approaches apply here?

Fat Possum has not stopped recording hill country blues because there is no active hill country blues music being made now. As much as Matthew Johnson has tried to convince listeners that the blues is dead, Cedric Burnside and Sharde Thomas are two young hill country blues musicians that prove him wrong. Both come from musical families and began playing hill country music when they were still in grade school. Thomas' grandfather Otha Turner began teaching her to play the fife when she was a child and she started performing with him at the age of seven. After his death in 2003, Thomas became the last remaining practitioner of this archaic tradition (Barretta). Cedric Burnside began playing drums for his grandfather R.L. when he was thirteen, first at Junior Kimbrough's juke joint and then on tours around the world (Cooper). Both of these young musicians take their art and the traditions behind their music seriously, and they refute the stereotype that blues artists must have one foot in the grave.

A look at their recent albums, both of which were self-released, exhibit what a blues record looks like when an artist chooses how they want their music to be represented. This is what I have been arguing throughout this thesis that Fat Possum's records lack; the voice of the artist in their representation. A limitation in this case is always money, as a record company's funds or access to a design team can help achieve a grander vision. Sharde Thomas' 2010 record *What Do I Do?* is dedicated to the memory of Otha and Bernice Turner. Bernice is Sharde's aunt, who passed away on the same day as Sharde's grandfather (and Bernice's father) Otha. Sharde played the fife and led the funeral procession for both family members at age thirteen. The cover of the record is a sepia-toned photograph of Thomas playing her fife. On the inner sleeve is a photo of the young Sharde being tutored by Otha, her playing the fife as he lovingly

watches. The liner notes are a long list of thank-you's with Sharde praising the divine and the earthly forces that lead to her musical inspiration. Her version of fife and drum music is influenced by her love of R&B, hip-hop, and soul. Her work shows that this archaic musical practice can evolve with contemporary sounds and feature Thomas' musical tastes as a young person without tarnishing the traditions it is connected to through her cultural heritage, place, and upbringing.

Many of these same themes are at play in the Cedric Burnside Project's Grammy-nominated album *Descendants of Hill Country*. The album cover is a simple black-and-white profile shot of Burnside. The liner notes by producer Amos Harvey detail the hill country heritage Cedric Burnside and Trenton Ayers share, and Harvey's interactions with both these musicians and their forefathers. Harvey first encountered the members of the Cedric Burnside Project when they were in their teens. "From then on and before to now, they have been making music; music they heard from their fathers and grandfathers," Harvey writes. There is no southern gothic romanticism, no discussion of violence. The band is deeply influenced and indebted to the music its members learned performing at Junior Kimbrough's juke and that Cedric learned drumming on the road for almost all of Fat Possum's bluesmen at various points in his early career. Guitarist Trenton Ayers was also involved in this scene since before his teens; the two are childhood friends. Burnside's youth and infectious joy add an energy and optimism to this blues that is not heard on the Fat Possum albums. Hill country blues does not have to be a relic from a creepy southern gothic past; it is clearly being made by young, forward-thinking musicians who are both embedded in the tradition and adding contemporary elements that speak to their young lives. In her study of the hip-hop scene in Clarksdale, Colleen Ali Neff writes, "To

the community in which it is being created, performed, updated, and renewed, the Delta blues is not climbing into the grave anytime soon” (32). The same can be said for hill country blues.

There is much work to be done that could expand on the ideas and evidence offered in this thesis. A natural next step would be a documentary project involving oral histories of Matthew Johnson and others involved with Fat Possum as well as friends and family of the blues artists who originally recorded for the label. I chose not to conduct interviews because my opinion of Johnson’s work was solidified after analyzing the materials I collected for Chapter 3, and I felt an interview with him would not have been a productive use of either my time or his. But, someone looking to focus on white blues influencers or blues record label owners might well find him to be a useful resource. Analyzing album artwork and liner notes was the most exciting part of this project, and I feel that this is an area that has not yet been fully explored in blues scholarship, aside from several studies that look at race records advertisements. An analysis of the artwork on independently released albums compared to albums released on major labels would be interesting, as would a comparison of folklore field recordings with commercial releases. The opportunities for different types of analysis here are endless. Even in our current world of digital music consumed on smartphones, we see the album cover on our phones when browsing for something new to listen to, and that is not to mention the resurgence in vinyl listening that has been brewing in recent years. Album artwork and liner notes still matter when considering how a listener interprets the music they hear. Who is deciding how an album cover looks is important for an album, for an artist, for a genre. All of these things are worth further study.

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**Jacqui Sahagian**  
**Curriculum Vitae**

**Nashville, TN | Oxford, MS**

**517-392-8043**

**jacqui.sahagian@gmail.com | jsahagia@go.olemiss.edu**

**Education**

M.A., Southern Studies, University of Mississippi, May 2018

Thesis: “The Same Old Blues Crap: Selling the Blues at Fat Possum Records”

Advisor: Adam Gussow

Graduate Minor in Women’s and Gender Studies

B.A., English Language and Literature, University of Michigan, May 2013

Creative Writing Subconcentration

Thesis: “Hooked,” collection of short fiction

Minor Cultural Anthropology

**Work Experience**

2017, editorial assistant, *Living Blues* magazine

2017, research assistant to Preston Lauterbach, author of *The Chitlin’ Circuit and the Road to Rock ‘n’ Roll and Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis*

2014-2016, freelance writer, *No Country for New Nashville*

2013-2015, features writer, *The Cheat Sheet*

**Selected Publications**

2018, *Living Blues* no. 253, profiles on Robert Kimbrough Sr. and Trenton Ayers

2017, *Living Blues* no. 251, Blues News on Ann Arbor Blues Festival

2017, *Living Blues* no. 250, “Clarksdale’s Next Generation of Blues,” profile on Lee Williams, “Please to See, Places to Eat, and Places to Stay”

2013, *The Michigan Daily* literary issue, short story “Pink,” poem “Orgasm”

2013, *Xylem* literary journal, poems “Swamp Song” and “Southern Comfort”

2012, *Gargoyle* humor magazine, short story “My Roommate’s Pheromones”

## **Scholarships & Awards**

### **M.A.**

2017, Lucille and Motee Daniels Award for best paper by a first-year Southern Studies M.A. student

### **B.A.**

2013, Hopwood Award in Undergraduate Creative Nonfiction  
2012, Hopwood Award in Undergraduate Fiction  
2012, Roy W. Cowden Fellowship  
2012, Jeffrey L. Weisberg Memorial Prize in Poetry  
2011 & 2012, James B. Angell Scholar  
2010, William J. Branstrom Freshman Prize  
2009, Marsh Family Scholarship  
2009, Beryl and Margaret Luttenton Scholarship  
2009, Murdock Scholarship  
2009, Buskirk Memorial Scholarship  
2009, Linda Van Boven Endowed Scholarship

## **Conferences & Presentations**

2018, "The Same Old Blues Crap: Framing the Blues from Race Records to Fat Possum," Mississippi Historical Society, Jackson, MS  
2018, "The Same Old Blues Crap: Fat Possum Records' Matthew Johnson and the Selling of Contemporary Blues," Southern Music Symposium, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS  
2017, "The Same Old Blues Crap: Fat Possum Records' Matthew Johnson and the Selling of Contemporary Blues," International Conference on the Blues, Delta State University, Cleveland, MS  
2017, "R.L. Burnside's Blues and the Marketing of Southern Black Masculinity at Fat Possum Records," Sarah Isom Center Student Gender Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS

## **Teaching Experience**

2017-2018, Graduate Writing Fellowship, University of Mississippi  
Department of Writing and Rhetoric  
Tutored students in undergraduate Southern Studies classes on their writing specific to the discipline  
Completed class on writing pedagogy to prepare for this role

2016-2017, T.A., University of Mississippi  
Introduction to Southern Studies

## **Community Involvement**

2016-2018, docent at Burns Belfry Museum & Multicultural Center, a historic African American Methodist Episcopal church preserved by the Oxford Lafayette County Heritage Commission