

RURAL ELECTRIFICATION

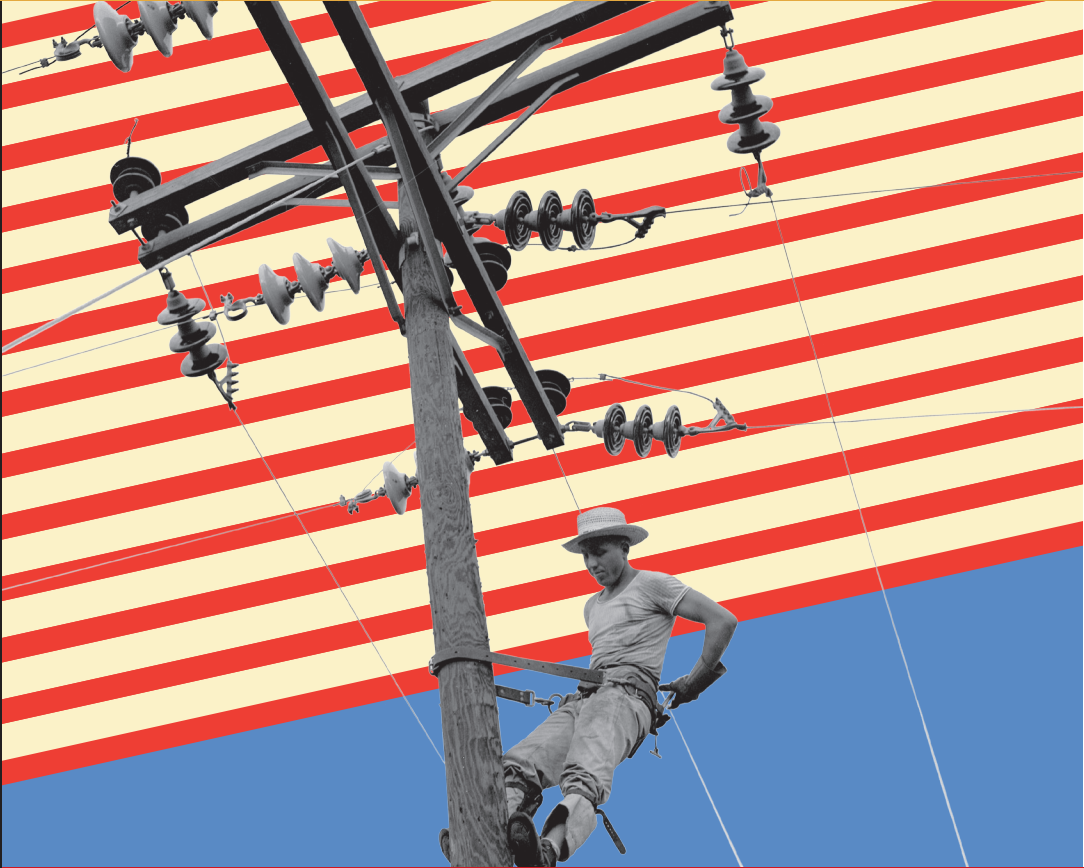
I learned most of these songs from recordings that were made in the 1920s and '30s in the southern United States. That time and place produced the music I've found most inspiring, ever since hearing Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James while still in high school. Later, I discovered Jimmie Rodgers, The Mississippi Sheiks, Clarence Ashley, Hambone Willie Newbern, Frank Hutchison, Clarence Greene, and many others.

Since I stopped working full-time as a musician several years ago, I've had time to study my favorite old-time tunes more carefully than I had before. It seems to me the deeper you go, the more the quirks and twists and subtleties begin to look like the essence (and genius) of the music rather than rough edges to be smoothed away. With my trusty Fraulini parlor guitar, I spent many hours on the back porch working out tunes and techniques, trying to get as close as I could to the original recordings, aiming to be as true as possible to their spirit and feel.

About a year ago I got myself a Gretsch electric guitar for kicks (my son is at the age where he might think that's "cool," so I guessed...). I started trying out the old-time arrangements on the Gretsch, and some of them seemed to work pretty nicely. Soon I had enough material for a new record....

The album title is taken from Franklin Roosevelt's Rural Electrification Act. Pun aside, it is also fitting, since that depression-era legislation affected many of the folks who made and listened to this kind of music. Besides, it was a federal government program that helped a lot of people in an age of privatization and warnings about the "menace of socialism."

I am pleased and honored to be working again with Angelynn Grant (she designed three of my previous CD releases). Her design pays tribute to Lester Beall, who created an amazing series of posters promoting the rural electrification effort that seem to me to be a perfect combination of tradition, simplicity, and modernity. —Peter Keane



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Lester Beall: American Design Pioneer

Largely unheralded as he was in the profession, it's interesting, though not surprising, to find out how many people think the great Lester Beall (1903–1966) was a European designer. Born in Kansas and brought up in the heartland—spending his favorite childhood moments on his grandparents' farm in Missouri—he drew inspiration from the groundbreakingers of the twentieth century: El Lissitzky and Man Ray, the Dadaists and the Bauhaus. But he worked from his own tenets of good design—for example, "The first requirement of a designer is thought" and "Good taste is a mark of good citizenship. Ugliness is a form of anarchy..."—arriving at an alchemy that was very much American in style, feel, and intent.

He was influenced in his early studies by Klee, Matisse, and Arp and in addition to his work with typography and images as a designer, he also created strikingly bold paintings and drawings, tapping his strengths as a visual artist throughout his career. He used photographic experiments like photograms and collages, planes, arrows, and tricks of reverse perspective to play with the 3D within the 2D, pushing the viewers to find depth and movement. A lot of his work, even for pharmaceutical client Upjohn's in-house magazine *Scope*, has a surreal aspect. His work has a timeless quality: ahead of its time back then, it's still fresh today, dated only by the objects, clothes, and hairdos in the photos.

Throughout his career, he was celebrated with exhibits and awards too numerous to list here, capped by a posthumous Lifetime Achievement Award by the AIGA in 1993. In 1937, he became the first graphic designer to be celebrated by a show at the Museum of Modern Art with the poster series he created for the



Rural Electrification Administration. Meant to "sell" electrification to rural communities where few learned to read, these posters had a graphic simplicity, visually arresting, yet clear.

Beall was also an early innovator in corporate identity and integrated product design, creating consistent and comprehensive visual systems for large companies like International Paper and Stanley tools. The creative freedom his clients gave him was a mark of their trust in his abilities and vision.

He was a proud owner of an extensive collection of books on art and design. One of his favorite quotations was by Ruskin: "Industry without art is brutality." In the last decades of his life, this collection was housed at his ultra-Mad Men, midcentury modern studio in Connecticut, called Dumbarton Farm, where he could watch his herd of Cheviot sheep on the other side of the barn through a special window in his office. Decisive in his design views, he was never known to lose his temper and his loyal team of designers at the Dumbarton office, along with everyone who knew him—loved ones and clients alike—mourned his death, remembering him as both a great designer and a wonderful human being.

To learn more, be sure to read R. Roger Hemington's excellent book *Lester Beall: Trailblazer of American Graphic Design*. —Angelynn Grant

Special thanks to James Stevens and Angelynn Grant for their expert help, advice, and vision.

Front cover photo: Hayti, Missouri, U.S. Rural Electrification Administration (REA) cooperative lineman: photo by Arthur Rothstein, July 1942 (Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Library of Congress)

Back cover photo: Sean G. Lane

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- 1. Sitting on Top of the World (2:42)**
Lonnie Carter, Walter Jacobs/MPL Music, ASCAP
- 2. Roll and Tumble Blues (2:33)**
Willie Newbern
- 3. Heart of My Heart (1:24)**
Ben Ryan/EMI Robbins, BMI
- 4. Little Sadie (2:55)**
Thomas Clarence Ashley/Fall River Music, BMI
- 5. Nobody's Dirty Business (2:27)**
Mississippi John Hurt/Wynwood Music, BMI
- 6. Johnson City Blues (2:22)**
Clarence Greene/Boot House of Tunes, BMI
- 7. When I Get Home (2:12)**
Elizabeth Cotten/Traditional
- 8. Illinois Blues (3:29)**
Skip James/Wynwood Music, BMI
- 9. Almost Gone (2:58)**
Peter Keane/Peter Keane Music, BMI
- 10. Back in My Home Town (2:54)**
Frank Hutchison
- 11. Nobody Knows But Me (2:09)**
Jimmie Rodgers-Elsie McWilliams/Peer International, BMI
- 12. Hobo's Lullaby (3:04)**
Goebel Reeves/Fall River Music, BMI



Peter Keane: vocals & electric guitar
Recorded & Mixed by James Stevens
at EAR Studio in Austin, Texas
Mastered by Jim Wilson, Jim Wilson
Mastering, Longmont, Colorado
Recorded January 13 and 26, 2015
Designed by Angelynn Grant



Dedicated with much love and gratitude to Amy & Eamonn.

LESTER BEALL

