

A man with a warm smile is the central focus of the image. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt. The background shows a chain-link fence and trees, suggesting an outdoor park or sports field setting. The entire image has a monochromatic, yellowish-green tint.

**NO MORE GOOD TIME IN THE WORLD FOR ME**

## INTRODUCTION

By Nathan Salsburg

African-American work songs are long gone. No more will we hear the rowing and boat-pulling chanteys of coastal Georgia and South Carolina or the river-sounding calls aboard packet steamers and the chants of the roustabouts as they unload at Paducah, Memphis, and Greenville. The tie-tamping cries of railroad gandy-dancers, the hollers of the muleskinners behind a plow or atop a levee, have all vanished like Lost John, the hero of one strain of songs, “like a turkey through the corn.”

The songs were singularly affecting, but it’s hard to mourn their extinction. Many of them arose from social, economic, and political arrangements that deserved to die. The iniquities of the turpentine, lumber, and levee camps; the injustices of the sharecropping system. Slavery itself.

The Southern black work songs that men sang while felling timber, chopping logs, clearing bottomland, picking cotton, and building levees thrived before the coming of machines that worked faster and cheaper. When the gangs were displaced, the songs were too. Alan Lomax, who

in 1933 first recorded them with his father, John A. Lomax, saw where they went: they “followed group labor into its last retreat, the road gang and the penitentiary.” Southern prison-farms recreated the brutality of slave plantations, with blacks toiling in all conditions under the supervision of armed white men on horseback, delivering cheap labor for the bosses that ran them. Work songs flourished there, Lomax continued, “because they were essential to the spiritual as well as the physical survival of the black prisoners.”

Folklorist Bruce Jackson was among the last to record work songs. In 1964 he visited Ramsey State Farm in Rosharon, Texas, where he found both a racial and a generational divide. The Texas Department of Corrections had recently begun to desegregate the work crews. Blacks said the whites didn’t have the rhythm to perform the songs; it’s likely that the whites were uninterested in doing so. Older prisoners had long relied on that rhythm to safely “sing down” a tree, or to ensure that teams worked in time so that individual inmates wouldn’t fall behind, risking a beating. But “younger blacks,” Jackson wrote, “saw the songs as holdovers from slavery and Uncle Tom days.”

At Ramsey Unit 2, Jackson met Johnnie B. Smith, prisoner #130196. A native of Hearne, Texas, Smitty was forty-six years old and on his fourth prison term. His earlier bits had been for “minor charges,” as he called them: two separate burglary convictions and a robbery by assault. This time, however, he was eleven years into a forty-five-year sentence for murdering his wife in a fight in Amarillo. “I got insane jealousy mixed up with love,” he told Jackson. “So many of us do that. Lot of fellas in here today on those same terms.”

In his younger days, Smitty toled lead hoe in a flat-weeding gang and led the work songs. It’s hard to overstate the importance of a good song leader in the penitentiary setting—one needed to be rhythmically, lyrically, and physically reliable, to maintain those songs over interminable hours of hard labor under an unforgiving south-central Texas sun.

But J.B. also sang other songs, different songs—those he’d made up to occupy himself while chopping sugarcane or picking cotton. He referred to them as his “little ol’ songs.” The longest stretched to thirty-three verses, or more than twenty-two recorded minutes. Although Smitty knew and sang a variety of melodies, to an assortment of work songs and sacred pieces,

he employed only one tune for his compositions. What changed were the tempo and the ornamentation with which he individualized them. “The Major Special,” “No More Good Time In The World For Me,” “Ever Since I Been A Man Full Grown”—each song Smith charged with its own emotional ambience, as a seasoned preacher intuits the particular colors and atmospheres that should imbue each portion of his service.

In *Wake Up Dead Man*, his 1972 book on the expressive culture of black convicts in Texas prisons, Bruce Jackson devoted a chapter to J. B. Smith. Smitty’s nine songs, he wrote, “form so coherent a document and so magnificent a piece of composition that they deserve a section by themselves,” and he presented them in numbered stanzas, like cantos. Drawn from both vernacular and personal sources, and thick with the cast and the argot of the penitentiary, Smith’s songs form an epic of the Southern prison-farm experience. He sings of long-time and lifetime skimmers, the sundown man and the danger line, and a procession of riders: a red-eyed captain and squabblin’ boss, a “well-experienced” river ranger with an eagle eye, the dog sergeant and his twelve bloodhounds. He catalogs a small arsenal of Derringers, Winchesters, shotguns, and a

German Luger, with concomitant bluster—"If I had my big horse pistol, I'd be dangerous too"—which will be familiar to listeners of other prison song recordings. Occasionally he invokes sites in the system—the Walls Unit at Huntsville, the Central Unit at Sugar Land—but more often he conjures places apart, places free: Oklahoma; Des Moines; Butte, Montana; Pocatello, Idaho; Abilene, where there's "the cutest little woman you ever seen"; Louisiana, "down with the whippoorwill." The resort at Hot Springs, Arkansas, appears three times. But most often Smitty is just gone. Long gone.

Smitty called the work songs "time songs," and time, understandably, was a primary preoccupation. In his 132 published stanzas, he employs the word "never" in 21 instances, "long" in 44. These numbers would be halved if it weren't for the most remarkable and affecting element of his composition: Smith nearly exclusively employed an ABBA rhyme scheme that turns couplets into quatrains. Narrative is stated and then restated, but often, through inversion of the first lines, from what feels like an emotional or existential remove. The experience is

of a closed circle, in which an initial idea comes limping back, occasionally desperate, though most times resigned. It's a device especially well suited to the circumstances of the prison farm, in which the inmates were worked from "can't to can't"—can't see in the morning until can't see at night—to rise before dawn the next day and do it all over again. And again.

*Been a long lane, buddy, it's a long lane, buddy, that ain't got no end,  
You may call me lucky but I'm goin' again.  
Whoa, you may call me lucky, hey man, but I'm goin' again.  
It's a long lane, partner, that don't have no end.*

When he was at Indiana University, Jackson had studied under Robert Fitzgerald, the translator of Homer. They met again later, when they were both at Harvard. Albert Lord was on campus there, too; he had recently published *The Singer of Tales*, his pioneering investigation of oral tradition and composition, from Homer to the Child ballads. He and Bruce often discussed the work both were doing. It's tempting to credit the influence of Fitzgerald and Lord, but it's good fortune alone that led Jackson, at Ramsey Unit 2, to an oral composer of a preeminent American vernacular epic: an introspective, soft-spoken habitual criminal prone to understatement, quiet irony, and self-effacing laughter. J.B. Smith's voice

was Homeric (Odysseus meets John Henry), but also Augustinian. His songs were confessions of regret, contrition, impotence, despair. They were also testaments to survival. After all, the purpose of the prison songs was, as Jackson wrote, "making it in Hell."

Smith was paroled in 1967, a year after his final session with Jackson and the release, on John Fahey's Takoma Records, of an LP—"Ever Since I Have Been A Man Full Grown"—of three of Smitty's songs. That summer, Bruce arranged for him to sing at the Newport Folk Festival, at which he appeared on stage with Pete Seeger, and, in one of the only photos that survive of him, in the

company of Robert Pete Williams and Muddy Waters. A couple of years passed before Bruce heard from him again. He had returned to Amarillo, where he preached for a while; a parole violation then sent him back to prison. That was the last Bruce ever heard of him.

*I want some missionary woman, please pray for me,  
Don't pray that I go to heaven, just pray that I go free.*

—Louisville, Kentucky, November 2014.



*Note on transcription: As discussed in the introduction, J.B. Smith typically used an ABBA rhyme scheme in his compositions, achieved by inverting a stanza's first two lines in the third and fourth. Ellipses are employed when that inversion is more or less a faithful repetition of lines 1 and 2.*

## DISC I

### I. NO MORE GOOD TIME IN THE WORLD FOR ME

No more good time, buddy, oh man, in the wide, wide world for me,  
'Cause I'm a lifetime skinner, never will go free...

Lifetime skinner, oh skinner, hold up your head,  
Well, you may get a pardon if you don't drop dead...

I been on this old Brazos, partner, so jumpin' long,  
And I don't know what side of the river, oh boy, my home is on,  
Don't know what side of the river, oh man, oh boy, my home is on,  
'Cause I been down on this old river, man, so jumpin' long.

Well, I lose all my good time, 'bout to lose my mind,  
I can hear my back door slammin', partner, I hear my baby cryin'...

You can go 'head on and marry, woman, little girl, don't wait on me,  
I got from now on, baby, to eternity...

If I ever get lucky, man, pay the debt I owe,  
Whoa boy, I won't be guilty of the charge no more...

If I ever go free, buddy, I just gon' walk and tell  
'Bout this lowland Brazos, it's a burnin' hell...

"Little boy, why you keep on a runnin', you just keep runnin' on your mind?"

Captain, I never had nothin' but that old runnin' time.

Well, I ain't never had nothin', captain, but this old runnin' time,  
That's why I keep on a runnin', just keep runnin' on my mind.

Little girl, make up your bed up higher, higher, woman, let your hair grow long,  
Oh, I be by to see you if I don't stay long.  
Well, I'll be by to see you, woman, if I can't stay long,  
Make your bed up higher, woman, let your hair grow long.

Well, if I ever make it, rider, ever make it to the danger line,  
I'm gon' be long gone, partner, gon' be hard to find.  
Well, I'm gonna be long gone, rider, sure be hard to find,  
If I ever make it 'cross that danger line.

If you lookin' for heaven, lookin' for heaven, you better go 'head by,  
But if you lookin' for trouble, you can stop and try...

Got your piece of pistol, rider, know you playin' half bad,  
Gonna be mine in the mornin', you just make me mad...

Had my .32-20, rider, just one round a lead,  
I wouldn't leave enough livin', oh man, to bury the dead...

What you do, buddy, get so jumpin' long?  
"Man, I kill Roberta, my woman, in the high sheriff's arms"...

Now if I never no more to see you, woman, oh black gal, do the best you can,  
I got a home on the river for a sundown man...

If you see my woman, buddy, hey buddy, please tell her for me,  
I'm a long-time skinner, never will go free...

## 2. WATCHING MY TIMBER

You better watch it, better watch it, better watching my timber  
Falling down, falling down.

Better watch it, better watch it, watching my timber  
Falling down, falling down.

Watching my timber, my timber getting limber,  
Watching my timber, my timber getting limber,  
I'm falling down, falling down.

Watching my timber, if it hits you don't you holler,  
Done warned you... done told you.  
Done warned you... done told you.  
Falling down, I'm falling down...

If it hits you don't holler, done warned you, done told you.  
If it hits you don't holler, done warned you, done told you.  
Falling down, I'm falling down.

Watch it, better watch it, better watching my timber.  
Watch it, better watch it, better watching my timber.

Timber getting limber, timber getting limber.  
Falling down, I'm falling down.

## 3. DROP 'EM DOWN TOGETHER

Drop 'em down together,  
Drop 'em down together,  
Drop 'em down together,  
Whoa, Lord.

Make 'em sound much better (x3)  
When you drop 'em down together.

Believe I'll call my baby (x4)

Partner, help me call 'em (x2)  
Won't you help me call 'em  
Whoa, Lord.

Oh Sandy Point Ida (3x)  
Whoa, Lord.

Well, she used to be my rider (3x)  
Whoa, Lord.

Oh Sandy Point Carrie (3x)  
Whoa, Lord.

That's the girl I'm gonna marry (3x)  
Oh, Lord.

Partner, help me call 'em (2x)  
Whoa, partner help me call 'em

Well, partner help me call 'em,  
Whoa, Lord.

Won't you bring me a drink a water (x3)  
Whoa, Lord.

Well, I don't wanna drink it (x3)

Wanna pour it on my diamond (2x)  
Whoa, Lord.

My diamond strikin' fire (2x)  
Well, my diamond strikin' fire,  
Whoa, Lord.

Won't you raise 'em up higher (2x)  
Go on and raise 'em up higher,  
Whoa, Lord.

Well, my partner got the butt cut (3x)  
Whoa, Lord.

Buddy got the second, (2x)  
Oh, yeah.

Well, I got the wing,  
[Spoken: Up in the top of the tree.]  
I got the wing, Lord (2x)  
Yes, oh, Lord.

#### 4. I GOT TOO MUCH TIME FOR THE CRIME I DONE

I got too much time, buddy, oh man, for the crime I done,  
Well, if I had a knowed it, I would've broke and run...

What you do, buddy, get your great long time,  
Oh man, accused me of robbing, oh boy, with a fire iron...

Whoa, but wasn't I lucky, hey, please consider me lucky, now when I got my time,  
I got it cut from one hundred, whoa boy, down to ninety-nine.  
Well, I got it cut from a hundred, oh boy, down to ninety-nine,  
Don't you consider me lucky, partner, when I got my time.

Ooh, well, I soon'd have one hundred, oh boy, as ninety-nine,  
Oh man, it ain't no different, partner, for they both lifetime...

Well, I been here rollin', buddy, so jumpin' long,  
But I be here rollin' when the boys all gone.  
Well, I be right here rollin', hey man, when the boys all gone,  
But I been on this old river, partner, so jumpin' long.

I done lose all my power, oh captain, out of my right arm,  
'Cause I'm way overloaded for the crime I've done.

Well, ain't no more loud hollerin', you may as well mumble low,  
You'll find hell on the river, partner, everywhere you go.  
Well, it'll be hell on the river, oh man, everywhere you go,  
No more loud hollerin' partner, you can mumble low.

Would you take money from a boy like me?  
I'd take money, partner, from the blind, can't see...

Well, they hung my partner, oh man, chucked a chain at me,  
Double-crossed Kilroy Jr., buddy, framed poor Stagolee.  
They double-crossed Kilroy Jr., oh man, framed poor Stagolee,  
Killed my partner, chucked a chain at me.

If I had my German Luger, oh my Luger, just one round of ball,  
Man, I'd leave here walkin', I wouldn't run at all...

Rider, your two-barrel Derringer, oh your Derringer, it don't worry my mind,  
Oh, the way I'm lookin' that's the way I'm goin'...

Well, I never got worried, never got worried, till I crossed the line,  
Got to thinking about the dog sergeant and them twelve bloodhounds...

Well, she told me not to worry, hey, not to worry, but I got to worry some,  
'Cause I'm way overloaded for the crime I done.

#### 5. THEY CAN'T DO THAT (TOAST)

So, boys, you know it's a damn shame  
When you have been fucked and also framed.  
Now here you is with fifteen years or more  
For some deeds that's done by some other son of a gun and you weren't even in on the door.

When you leave the courthouse you'll tell your friends  
How they framed you and left you flat.  
You know it would make any man sore as hell  
Hear a guy sit around and say, "Oh man, they can't do that."

But I tell you when it's hell:  
When you're laying in your cell in some lousy old county jail  
And the lawyer come and shook you down for every cent of your cocksucking kill,  
Then kicked your best girl out in the streets and sold all the fixtures in your flat.  
And here come a jailbird slidin' up to you, says "Oh man, they can't do that."

When I finish my round up on earth and start my bit in hell,  
I hope to see 'em fry, each and every guy, that's ever let that word yell.  
And he be standing up on them big red hot coals and his body melting down in fat,  
I'm a slide up to Tom Devil and say, "Look out man, you can't do that."

## 6. I HEARD THE REPORTS OF A PISTOL

Well, I heard the reports of a pistol, whoa man, down the right a way,  
Must've been my partner tryin' to make a getaway.  
Whoa, they killed my partner tryin' to get away,  
Just heard the reports of a pistol, down the right a way.

If I leave here runnin', don't you follow me,  
I'm a long-time skinner, want to be free.  
Well, I'm a long-time skinner, sure want to be free,  
I hate to be charged with murder in the first degree,  
Hate to be charged with murder in the first degree,  
Now if I leave here runnin', don't you follow me.

If you don't believe, partner, that I killed a man,  
Send and get my record, buddy, from Sugar Land.  
Well, you can see my record, buddy, in Sugar Land,  
If you don't believe, partner, I would kill a man.

Old Boot Hill over yonder strictly belong to me,  
Partner, cold-blood murder is my pedigree...

I got a red-eyed captain, squabblin' boss,  
Oh, work in the mud and the water, just won't knock off...

Well, I asked the captain, did my money come,  
"What the hell you care, don't owe you none.  
What the hell you care, don't owe you none,  
Better get to rollin', get my levee done."

I done lose all my good time, buddy, 'bout to lose my mind,  
The way I'm a lookin', that's the way I'm goin'...

Everybody is talkin' 'bout Mary Blair,  
The poor girl's crippled, and the clothes she wear.  
Oh, nothin' to the black gal, just the clothes she wear,  
Everybody talkin', talkin' 'bout Mary Blair.

Ever go West Texas, stop in Abilene,  
I got the cutest little woman you ever seen...

I don't wanna be here when the last man die,  
I don't want no trouble outta Marble Eye...

## 7. DRINKING THAT WINE

If my brother asks for me, tell him that I went on to Galilee,  
I ought to been there ten thousand years,  
Drinkin' that wine.

Drinkin' that wine, wine, wine,  
Good ol' W-I-N-E wine.  
I ought to been there ten thousand years,  
Drinkin' wine.

If my sister asks for me, tell her that I went on to Galilee,  
I ought to been there ten thousand years,  
Drinkin' wine.

Drinkin' wine, wine, wine,  
Good ol' W-I-N-E wine.  
I ought to been there ten thousand years,  
Drinkin' wine.

*Spoken:* That's another tree cutting song. [Jackson: You can just keep that going as long as you want?]  
As long as you want it. You can go around brother, sister, father, mother, anybody you want to: "Ought  
to have been there ten thousand years, drinking wine." That's a tree cutting song, incidentally.



## 8. EVER SINCE I BEEN A MAN FULL GROWN

*Bruce Jackson, 1972: Someone interrupted us momentarily at the end of stanza 16 and when Smitty resumed the contour was elongated considerably.*

Ever since I been a man, oh boy, a man full grown,  
I been skippin' and a dodgin' for old farmer Jones...

Well, my lead mule's crippled, partner, whoa, my wheel mule's blind,  
Was the best in the country, but done been drove down...

Well, I done a been all around, partner, in the whole corral,  
Couldn't find a mule, buddy, with his shoulder well...

All you long line skimmers, you better learn to skin,  
Man comin' here in the mornin', want a hundred men...

Well, talkin' 'bout your hamstrings poppin' them old leather lines,  
Oughta heard the back bands stretchin', partner, and the collars cryin'...

I done worked old Rhody, hey man, I worked old Moll,  
But I ain't gon' stop rollin' till I work them all.

Little boy, little boy, if you can't hold 'em, you can't hold 'em, don't let 'em fool you here,  
'Cause old Jesse James Seefus, partner, the walkin' 'lectric chair...

Well, but me and my partner, oh rider, and my partner's friend,  
We could pick more cotton in the country than your gin can gin...

When I go up the country, hey, gon' tell all the boys,  
"Don't you come no further south, buddy, than Illinois..."

I want some missionary woman, oh woman, please pray for me,  
Don't pray that I go to heaven, just pray that I go free...

Sometimes I wonder, oh, can I get my long time done,  
Oh boy, I prayed for better, man, but worsen come...

If I had the good luck, buddy, hey, oh like I had the bad,  
I'd win a barrel of dollars and a keg of halves...

Life been a long long gamble, I just can't seem to win,  
Hmm, you don't believe I'm a sinkin', look what a hole I'm in...

Been a long lane, buddy, it's a long lane buddy, that ain't got no end,  
You may call me lucky, but I'm goin' again...

"What you want me to tell your mama, tell your mama, oh boy, when I go home?"  
Tell her you left me rollin', buddy, but I ain't got long.

I got a high yellow woman, woman, man, in the world somewhere,  
She got three gold teeth, long black curly hair...

Well, if you don't tell her, tell her, man, she will never know,  
I got a home in Pocatello, oh man, Idaho.

Well, I'm goin' to Oklahoma, marry a Indian squaw,  
When I get her daughter, I be her son-in-law,  
Well, when I marry her daughter, gonna be her son-in-law,  
Well, I'm goin' to Oklahoma, get me an Indian squaw.

If I beat you to the Brazos, sergeant, oh man, you can blow your horn,  
Well, I done got worried, I'll be gone 'fore long...

Captain, captain, you can count your men,  
Well, it's some goin' to the building and it's some gone in,  
Well, it's some goin' to the bushes and some gone in,  
Well, it's cool kind captain, you better count your men.

Everybody talkin', talkin', man, 'bout old Danger Blue,  
If I had my big horse pistol, I'd be dangerous, too...

Had my big horse pistol, buddy, just one round of ball,  
I would leave here walkin', I wouldn't run at all.

"Mornin', mornin', captain." He said, "Good mornin', Shine."

"I don't want no trouble, captain, I want that gal a mine."...

Man, they accuse me a murder, oh murder, and I ain't raised my hand,  
They accuse me a forgery, I can't write my name...

Now I'm further up the river, oh man, than I ever been,  
Me and my partner, nothin' but a walkin' gin...

Well, I been here rollin', partner, ever since nineteen and ten,  
But if you keep on gamblin', partner, I know you bound to win...

It's gonna rain, rain, rain, partner, oh boy, then turn cold,  
But I don't mind the weather if the wind don't blow...

Saddest word in history, buddy, that I ever read,  
"You got to do one hundred for the life you led..."

Well, you may be a bully, but you no bad man,  
Uncle Bud will get you, put you on the ball and chain...

Man, wasn't I lucky, wasn't I lucky, when I didn't get killed?  
Got in a Saturday night ruckus, partner, with old Trigger Bill,  
Whoa, Saturday night ruckus, mean old Trigger Bill,  
Wasn't I lucky that I didn't get killed?

Rather been in Louisiana, partner, down with the whippoorwill,  
Than to be here in Texas treated like I feel...

Due to be in Butte, Montana, oh man, this very day,  
If I ever get lucky, goin' be on my way.

But it ain't one thing, partner, oh boy, I done wrong,  
I stayed in Texas just a day too long...



## DISC 2

### 1. SURE MAKE A MAN FEEL BAD

*(J.B. Smith, lead vocal, with Jesse "G.I." Hendricks, Frank Young, and Houston Zachary)*

Sure hate to see poor mother go  
It sure make a man feel bad  
Might have lived long if I hadn't a grieved her so  
It sure make a man feel bad

*[Chorus:]* Make a long time man feel bad  
It sure make a man feel bad  
She might have lived long if I hadn't a grieved her so  
It make a long time man feel bad

Can't get no letter, can't get a word from home  
It sure make a man feel bad  
Seem like everybody is dead and gone  
Make a long time man feel bad

*[Chorus after each verse, inserting third line of preceding verse.]*

Cotton is grassy, the sun is hot  
Thinking about all of this time I got

Too late to work, too scared to run  
Wish I was back home where I come from

Stay at home, you do as you please  
Come down here you got to work or leave

Wouldn't mind workin' for Uncle Sam  
Workin' for Uncle Bud ain't worth a damn

Finally got a letter, this the way it read  
Your Roberta, she's sick in bed

If I had the governor like he got me  
Wake up in the morning I'd set him free

Never had nothin' to worry me so  
Lose my money and I know a good whore *[no chorus]*

Woman I'm lovin' done let this town  
That ain't all, she done put me down

Sometime I have old aches and pains  
Got to go on now just the same

Big bell tolled just a while 'fore day  
Better get ready, go yonder way.

### 2. TRIED BY FIRE

*Spoken:* Oh, "Tried By Fire?" Oh yeah, it's kind of a group song, like, but I mean it's always had a leader, sure. Let's see how I wanna get started.

Partner, help me call 'em, oh partner, help me call 'em.  
Partner, help me call 'em, whoa man.

Well, I sure do hate to call 'em, well, I sure hate to call 'em,  
Hollerin', whoa man. Sure do hate to call 'em, hollerin' whoa.

I told you I'm the devil, hollerin' whoa man.  
I told you I'm the devil, hollerin' whoa.

I'm the devil from hell, sir, hollerin' whoa man.  
I'm the devil from hell, sir, hollerin' whoa.

They tried me by water, hollerin' whoa man.  
Been tried by water, hollerin' whoa.

Water wouldn't drown me, hollerin' whoa man  
Water wouldn't drown me, hollerin' whoa.

I've been tried by fire, hollerin' whoa man.  
Been tried by fire, hollerin' whoa.

Oh, Bull and Jack of Diamonds, hollerin' whoa man.  
Oh, Bull and Jack of Diamonds, hollerin' whoa.

He's a river, river ruler, hollerin' whoa man.  
He's a river, river ruler, hollerin' whoa.

If you walk he'll drive you, hollerin' whoa man.  
If you walk he'll drive you, hollerin' whoa.

If you buck he'll ride you, hollerin' whoa man.  
If you buck he'll ride you, hollerin' whoa.

He's a cold river ruler, hollerin' whoa man.  
He's a cold river ruler, hollerin' whoa.

He's a pull-do fooler, hollerin' whoa man.  
He's a pull-do fooler, hollerin' whoa.

*Spoken:* You can carry it on as long as you want to, but it just all centers around the same thing.

### 3. WOMAN TROUBLE

She left me this mornin', never said a word.  
Whoa man, nothin' I done, partner, just on somethin' she heard.  
Well, wasn't nothin' I done, buddy, just on somethin' she heard,  
Woman left me this mornin', never said one word.

"What you do, partner, with your summer change?"  
Man, I spent it all on the women for a great big name...

Waterboy, waterboy, waterboy, won't you bring your water 'round,  
I got a great big notion to lay the hammer down...

I don't see no fire but I'm burnin' down.  
Don't see no fire, partner, but I'm burnin' down.

Well, you hear the shotgun blastin', whoa man, know somebody lost  
Jumped in Big Muddy, whoa man, tried to cross...

Said she'd be back tomorrow, whoa partner, but she carried her clothes  
She don't be here tomorrow, she will the next day show...

You don't feel like a hollerin', oh rider, oh boy, wave your hands,  
There's a man at the crossin', he gon' let me by.  
It's a man at the crossin', he gon' let me by.  
You don't feel like hollerin', just wave your hands goodbye.

Well, my mama, heard her call me, poor boy, answered, "Ma'am?"  
Say, ain't you tired of rollin' for Mister Cunningham.  
Well, ain't you tired of haming, poor sonny, for Mister Cunningham,  
Poor boy, my mama she called me and I answered "Ma'am."

Well, my papa he called me, sonny, and I answered "Sir?"  
"If you tired of rollin' what you stay there for?"  
If you tired of haming, sonny, what you stay there for?"  
Poor boy, my papa called me and I answered "Sir."

Well, my woman finally called me, she called me, whoa, I answered "Hey."  
"If you tired of rolling why don't you run away?"...

Can't run away, woman, tell you the reason why,  
They got a man at the crossing, he won't let me by...

Well, I ain't tired of rollin, I just got so long.  
Just to keep down trouble I guess I'll go 'head on...

She got a hole in her belly, boy, and it won't get well,  
Well, the more you rub it, well, the more it swell...

Every time, buddy, every time, partner, man, I go to pee,  
Chills and fever they come down on me.

I went to see my doctor, he said "Boy, I can't tell,  
Now you may get better but you can't get well."  
Well, I may get better but I can't get well.  
Went to see my doctor and he can't tell.

Long as I live, partner, long as I live, poor boy, never die,  
No more lovin' will I have to buy...

I know you're gonna murder me, rider, rider, why don't you set a day?  
I don't have religion, I need time to pray...

Ain't nothin' but Tom Devil make a man do wrong,  
Well, I'm gonna do better, man, from this day on.

I believe that lead-row bully, rider, got a mojo hand,  
He's a seven-day roller, captain, and a sundown man...

I got a free transportation, oh man, in the world somewhere,  
May be a long time a comin' but you welcome here...

If you stay in Huntsville, partner, oh boy, you may get by,  
You come down on Ramsey, you got to rise and fly...

"When you get your big old money, hey man, whichaway you goin'?"  
Somewhere way up the country, oh boy, around Des Moines...

*Spoken:*

Smith: That's about the end of that now.

Jackson: That was a short one, huh? *[Laughter.]*

#### 4. ON COMPOSITION (SPOKEN)

And these songs too, Mr. Jackson—you know, you stay here so long, man really can compose one of these if he want to. Last time you were, like, up to now, several verses wouldn't be nothing for me to get together; put together. You can really, you know, just make them. They just come to you. Your surroundings, the place you familiar with; you can always make a song out of your surroundings. I read about some great poetries, like King David and them. I believe it's King David or King Solomon. No, King David was, in the Bible—he used to made his psalms from the stars and so forth and he wrote so many songs, you know. With a little talent and surrounding I think it's kinda easy done. *[Laughter.]*

#### 5. THE MAJOR SPECIAL

Oh, you come down on this Ramsey, partner, 'specially Ramsey Two,  
Fix it in your mind, buddy, you got your time to do...

Don't try to punch it, partner, you can't get away  
Under the supervision of Major McGaughy...

No, you can't beat the rider, ain't no use to try,  
He's a well-experienced river ranger with a eagle's eye...

Horse he used to ride was pretty, oh, I long remember Prince,  
Tread water like old Rattler, jump a shallow fence...

Way back in the '30s, whoa, in the '30s, partner, I hooked up with them,  
Whoa, he made me a roller, partner, I learned under him...

Well, he raised premium watermelon, cotton a bumper crop,  
Sugar cane don't you mention, boy, that's all he's got...

Major, he knows the river, oh, he know the river, from the upside down,  
Sandy land, old original, black land, and the new ground.

He's a man of law and order, ain't no doubt about it,  
Please don't break the monopoly, you'll regret you ever started.

If you come down to this old Ramsey, why you plannin' and a figurin',  
Plan on leavin' legal, workin' for your livin'.

Well, the summer gone and a comin', keep a comin', I may be here to stay,  
I got a home under supervision of Major McGaughy.

Now you talkin' about all your troubles, whoa, your troubles, man, oh boy, I had mine,  
Whoa, workin' Moreland brothers, got the best go here...

## 6. NO PAYDAY HERE

I used to weigh two hundred, two hundred, now I'm skin and bone,  
Ever make a payday, captain, Hot Spring I'm goin'...

Well, I asked the captain, asked the captain, "Did the payroll come?"  
"What the hell you care, partner, I don't owe you none."

If I never make a payroll, captain, if they never call my name,  
Can't see the healing water, never make Hot Spring...

Tell me Louisiana, big Louisy, oh boy, the murderer's home,  
May be a cemetery, partner, that's where I belong.

Write her one more letter, one more letter, I got to go myself,  
I done lose my woman, everything I left.

Well, I heard a Winchester chargin', Winchester chargin', just a while 'fore day,  
If you can't beat a bullet, partner, you can't get away...

Well, don't let me catch you, rider, rider, see you foolin' around,  
Lord, I'd rather be shot to pieces than stay here hobbled down.  
Well, I'd rather be shot all to pieces, rider, than stay here hobbled down,  
Don't let me catch you foolin', rider, oh Lord, lookin' around.

The shotguns keep on blastin', just a blastin', somebody may be lost,  
Sometime they shoot just to stop you, partner, sometime where the 'spenders cross,

Sometime they shoot just to stop you from runnin', man, sometime where your 'spenders cross.  
When you hear the shotguns a blastin', somebody may be lost.

You can tell 'em I'm leavin', I'm leavin', you can tell 'em when,  
Some goin' to the bushes, partner, and there's some goin' in...

Well, you never know who be lucky, whoa boy, if you never try,  
You may run on from under the gun, partner, you may beat the crossfire...

Well, when you wake up here every mornin', every mornin', then it's all day long,  
Whoa boy, you can't hear nothing, buddy, but just "Go 'head on"...

Captain, he said, "Hurry, hurry, man"; the rider said, "Run."  
Had my way, partner, wouldn't do neither one...

Ain't made a payday, captain, captain, since I been gone,  
Rain or shine, buddy, got to go right on.

Sure like to see the governor, Governor Connally, I don't have my fare,  
Sure like to see you, Governor, we don't have no payday here.  
We just don't have no payday here,  
Like to see the governor, just don't have my fare.

Governor John Connally, please, Governor, if you see me as a man,  
Please consider me in your working, working, your release working plan.

If you hold 'em here, buddy, if you hold 'em here, partner, you hold 'em anywhere,  
But we just don't have no payday here.

I'll make you this promise, this promise, to three or four reliable men,  
If you sign my release this time, Governor, won't have to do it again,  
Well, if you sign my release, Governor, Governor Connally, won't have to do it again,  
I promise the good Lord above, Governor, three or four responsible men.

We never have had no payday here,  
Talkin' 'bout your trouble, boy, I had my share.

## 7. AT THE CROSS

Alas, and did my savior bleed  
And did my sovereign die?  
Would he devote that sacred head  
For such a worm as I?

At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light,  
And the burden of my heart rolled away,  
It was there by faith I received my sight,  
And now, so happy all day.

Was it for crimes that I had done  
He groaned upon the tree?  
Amazing pity, grace unknown  
And love beyond degree.

But drops of grief can never repay  
The debt of love I owe.  
Here Lord, I give myself away,  
'Tis all that I can do.

Well, might the sun in the darkness hide  
And shut his glories in,  
When Christ the mighty maker died,  
For man the creature's sin.

At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light,  
And the burden of my heart rolled away,  
It was there by faith I received my sight,  
And now, so happy all day.

## 8. POOR BOY NUMBER TWO

Very first day on the Brazos line, poor boy, on the Brazos line,  
Number one was a buckin', Number two was flyin', whoa boy, Number Two was flyin',  
Number Three was a hurryin' and the pull-dos cryin', whoa boy, the pull-dos cryin'...

Next day, poor boy, on your turnrow, you know the sun was a hundred degrees.  
All I could hear was a poor boy say, "Some day we'll all go free."  
Some day we'll all go free, poor boy, some day we'll all go free.  
All I could hear those poor boys say, "Some day we'll all go free."

Hot scaldin' water rollin' down my eyes, dizzy, I can't hardly see,  
Can't keep up with the other boys, won't you please have mercy on me.  
Won't you please have mercy on me, a poor boy, Captain, have mercy, please.  
I can't keep up with the other boys, won't you please have mercy on me.

Just one more chance in life, poor boy, to do the right or wrong,

This hell wouldn't be my portion, boy, this hell wouldn't be my home.  
This hell wouldn't be my home, poor boy, no boy, wouldn't be my home,  
Just one more chance in life, poor boy, to do the right or wrong.

I'd go some place and settle down, contented with well-doin',  
Tell all the people on the street I meet what a lesson I have learned.  
What a lesson I have learned, poor boy, a lesson I have learned,  
Go somewhere and settle down, what a lesson I have learned.

To be a disobedient child you often pay full fare,  
You boarded your train way down the line to finally pay off here.  
You finally pay off here, poor boy, you finally pay off here,  
You boarded your train way down the line, you finally pay off here.

The sun's goin' down and so am I, wonder who will be the first.  
Of all the things ever happened to me, tell me what could be the worst.  
Oh, tell me what could be the worst, poor boy, tell me what could be the worst,  
Out of all the things ever happened to me, tell me what couldn't be the worst.

Go down, sunshine, go down, sunshine, oh hurry, please go down,  
This aggie hoe, this grassy row, won't let me see sundown.  
Won't let me see sundown, poor boy, it won't let me see sundown,  
This aggie hoe, this grassy row, won't let me see sundown.

Don't want no supper, just want my bed, get all the rest I can,  
Be morning again before you know, I'll be in another strain.  
Oh, I'll be in another strain, poor boy, I'll be in another strain,  
Be morning again before you know, I'll be in another strain.

Wish I had a listened to mom and dad, they knew the best for me,  
I'd never had this bridge to cross, never had this misery.  
Never had this misery, poor boy, this misery,  
I'd a never had this bridge to cross, never had this misery.

Here's to the boys in my hometown, on Highway 6 at Hearme,  
Gamin' and chancin' with the law, don't worth the time I'm doin',  
It don't worth the time I'm doin, poor boy, don't worth the time I'm doin',  
Gamin' and chancin' with the law, don't worth the time I'm doin'.

Chancin' with the long-armed law, you seldom win or draw,  
Gamin' and chancin' with the law, you seldom win or draw.

*Spoken:* "Poor Boy," part two. Newly composed. Correlates with the past and mostly present incidents. This is the time of year we really work here; this is cotton-chopping time. This is cotton chopping season in the sunny south. *[Laughter.]*

## 8. ON GETTING OUT (SPOKEN)

I told the parole officer the other day when I talked to him I says, truly, I wants to get out real bad, I said, of course, but I don't want to get out half as bad as I want to stay out. *[Laughter.]* He laughed. I said, I'm serious, though. I mean that. I mean every part of that.

This is the first time that I feel like that I'm really ready for a parole. I mean, I thought the other times, you know, I might have been, but I mean, I didn't have no set pattern to live by that was gonna keep me out or cope with society—gonna stay out there with them, you know. The Constitution of the United States, I mean, I didn't think in those terms. But these twelve years got me. They brought me. *[Laughter.]* They brought me. Yes, sir.

## 9. GO AHEAD

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
All things in earth and heaven on high.  
Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.  
Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.

To the glory of the Father and the Son,  
Holy Ghost—they are all in one.  
Go ahead, go ahead...

Thus says the Lord, you wanna be redeemed,  
Believe, receive John 3:16.

God gave all he had, his only son,  
What more can he do than he has done?

Take up your cross and you can't be lost,  
But go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.

There are three up there, that bear record on high,  
The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

These all three they agree in one,  
Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.

There are three in earth met at Calvary Tree,  
The Spirit, the Water, and the Blood makes three.

Now can't you see, means everything to me,  
They all agree in one.  
Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.  
Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.

*Spoken:* That's it.



## GLOSSARY

*Adapted from Bruce Jackson's Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Worksongs from Texas Prisons (1972):*

**BOTTOM:** Rich, alluvial farmland near the rivers.

**BRAZOS RIVER:** Begins at the intersection of the White and Double Mountain Fork rivers, about sixty miles north of Abilene, Texas, and winds through all the southern units of the state prison system (Ramsey, Retrieve, Darrington, Sugar Land, Central and Jester) and it serves as an important image in many of the system's songs. In fact, the contiguity of the Brazos is why the work songs are called river songs. There are many images of making it to the river and crossing over. In the old days, the river was as much an obstacle to the guards as it was to the escaping convicts: the Brazos is too treacherous to trust a good horse in, and a man who swam it had a good chance of staying loose for a little while. Before radio communication, it was hard for the pursuers to catch up if an inmate crossed over, and the dogs would have to be relocated to pick up his trail again. But there is also something of the spirituals' tradition of the function of a river; the folkloristic motif of the transmogrifying capability of a body of dangerous water.

**CALLING THEM:** Singing lead.

**CAPTAIN:** One of the ranks in the guard hierarchy, usually the man in charge of half the work force in the field. In the old days a captain was in charge of each camp. (See "rider.") The term was used exclusively in the South in the free world (meaning the white boss) and may derive from that.

**DANGER LINE:** The "danger line," Smith told Jackson, "is the dividing line between the state land and the free land, the penitentiary and the free world. We always call that the danger line no matter which way you're goin'. 'Cause when you leave the state property you's in the free world, and so there's always somebody at the danger line to keep you, try to keep you from going, of course. The high rider, dog boy, somebody. But now, usually, if you beat them to the danger line you got a pretty good chance—there's nobody on the other side to shoot at you right away."

**DIAMOND:** axe.

**HAMING:** Working, probably derives from an elision of hammering.

**LINE:** The groups of men working in the fields on any particular day.

**PULL-DO:** An incompetent worker; someone who shirks or makes too many mistakes; someone who can't pull his own weight in a squad.

**RATTLER:** The original tracking hound, the one who can follow any trail, walk a log, swim the treacherous Brazos River. There is a well-known work song about him, and he is sometimes mentioned in other songs (see disc 2, track 5). Jackson was told that it was a tradition to name at least one dog on each farm "Rattler."

**RIDER:** When the men work in the fields they are watched by at least one, and usually several, guards on horseback, all of whom are called riders. The high rider is the only rider armed with a rifle; he is positioned away from the workforce so he can have a better view of the area (and so no one can get the jump on him). A captain will be in charge of a large work area; there are usually two majors, one in charge of the building and the other in charge of the entire prison force (in the old days, before shifting to the warden system, the prisons were each in charge of a major, the individual camps under a captain). Accompanying the men to the fields is a pack of tracking dogs handled by the inmate "dog boy," supervised by the guard "dog sergeant."

**ROLLIN':** working.

**RUNNIN' TIME:** "Running time" is an indeterminate sentence, such as two-to-ten or ten-to-twenty years. Modern penology favors such sentences over "flat time" (twenty years or ten years or fifty years) because a man who shows what authorities consider great progress may be paroled early. The majority of inmates dislike the running sentence because, they say, they do as much time as they do under flat time and are burdened with many years of uncertainty and unfulfilled hope. The argument is loaded, for the inmates for whom the hope is fulfilled go home and aren't around to complain.

**SEEFUS, JESSE JAMES:** Has the reputation of being the fastest cotton picker ever to be an inmate in the TDC. J.B. Smith said of him: "Jesse James Seefus, he claims himself a walkin' electric chair in the cotton patch. He say, 'I'll execute anybody that keeps up with me.'"

**SKINNER:** Man who handles mule teams.

**SUNDOWN MAN:** Refers, Smith told Jackson, to "the way they used to work here years ago. They'd work right up to just about as long as they could, long as it was day. We'd often say we glad God made day and night, 'cause if it stayed day all the time they'd work a man to death the way we used to work here."

**TIMBER GETTIN' LIMBER:** Call indicating that a tree is getting ready to fall; it's begun swaying back and forth.

**TURNROW:** Road around a large planted area.

Well - a, no more good time, poor boy, in the  
world for me. Well, I'm a long - time  
skin - ner, Oh, nev - er will - a go free. Well, I'm a  
long - time skin - ner, nev - er will be  
free, Hmm, No more good time, bud - dy, in the  
wide, wide world for me.



"Peckerwood Hill," Ramsey's convict cemetery