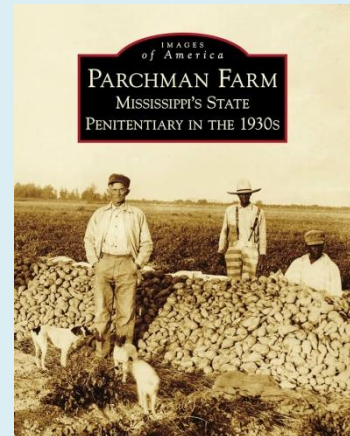


The gruesome history of Parchman Farm dates back to 1901, when the State of Mississippi bought up former plantation land in the heart of the Delta. Work on Parchman's eighteen thousand acres took place from sunup to sundown. For years, the head driver (The Captain) would mete out punishment with a leather strap known as 'Black Annie'. Research has exposed the depth of brutality at Parchman—inoperable showers and toilets, cells that lack mattresses and rooms overrun with rats.



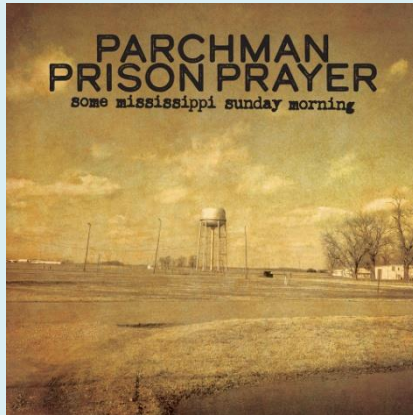
Within this place of cruelty, amid these atrocities, there was always music. There were work songs, through which incarcerated people could occupy their voices and their minds while their bodies toiled. There were field hollers, rising above the repetitive sounds of sharecropping—upbeat if the work was moving quickly, slower when it had begun to take its toll. There were songs that were also pleas: for food, for water, for rest, for a someone left behind, for someone beyond the walls who might still have an ear to the wind. There were songs of devotion, asking for mercy and forgiveness, and also preaching the gospel of giving oneself over to God. Some of these songs were coded messages for clandestine meetings, songs such as Steal away, Follow the drinking gourd.

Parchman Farm is not the only such institution with a rich musical legacy. In 1959, the folklorist Harry Oster recorded an album at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a.k.a. Angola Farm. But Parchman has a special connection to the Delta blues, because several of the best Mississippi bluesmen—among them Booker (Bukka) White, R. L. Burnside, and Big Bad Smitty—did sentences there. The blues songs that came out of Parchman functioned as a form of testimonial. Musicians would get out of prison and, through song, bring word of what it was like on the inside. Bukka White, on *Parchman Farm Blues*, recorded in 1940, shortly after his release from the farm, sings of starting work just at break of day and issues a warning: Oh, listen, you men, I don't mean no harm / if you wanna do good, you better stay off ol' Parchman farm.



At an interview with a man by the name of Bama (Alan Lomax - 1940) he was asked what makes a good work-song leader. It doesn't matter if a person can sing just like Peter could preach,. If he didn't know what to sing about, well, he wouldn't do no good. By contrast, he continues, here's a fella, maybe he ain't got no voice for singing, but he's been cooperating' with the people so long, and been on the job so long . . . he knows just exactly how it should go. (Listen to We need another witness 1951) Bama is hoping one day to be released, through song, either from his earthly prison woes or from eternal ones. I presume his point was, when there is nothing left but to express fear, deprivation and to cry for release of the obscenity of such cruelty through song (Listen to: Prison work songs - Tangle eye

blues), it was that a leader's singing voice mattered less than whether he knew what to say to help men on the line achieve deliverance.



Album: Parchman Prison Prayer - A solo version of *Hosanna* features a singer with a soothing, sweet tenor accompanied only by what sounds like some faint tapping on a chair or a table. *Locked Down, Mama Prays for Me*, one of two original pieces on the album, is the spoken-word performed over a background of fingers snapping and a vocalist singing the Canton Spirituals song *Ride This Train*, which serves as both a joyful invitation and a gentle word of caution. The original song: *Running for My Life* becomes, *I Gotta Run*, a fifty-second free-form repetition of the titular lyrics. Only at the very end of the track is the thought completed, by a group singing, hauntingly, in the background.

Many of the small miracles of Parchman Prison Prayer hinge on the power of voices working in unison. A gospel choir melds singers into a single entity. Incarceration collapses individuality in a different way, the songs help to maintain dignity and sense of person.

This particular slice of research has had me believing in the power of men gathering, in an inhumane place, to wrestle back some slice of their humanity by saying, whatever they haven't already taken from me, I will surrender to Jesus.

This album is readily available through various resources. I recommend it to anyone interested in the history of the 'Blues' – Just ensure a plentiful supply of tissues. This is the true bedrock of the blues.

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