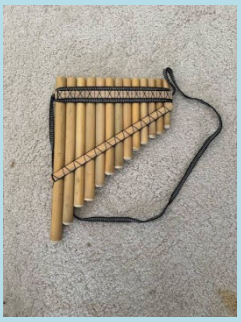
Thomas, Henry [Ragtime Texas] (1874–ca. 1950). Henry *Ragtime Texas* Thomas, an early exponent of country blues, was born in Big Sandy, Texas, in 1874, one of nine children of former slaves who sharecropped on a cotton plantation in the North-Eastern part of the state. Because of his experiences Thomas learned to hate cotton farming at an early age and left home as soon as he could, around 1890, to pursue a career as an itinerant singer / busker / Bluesman.

Thomas first taught himself to play the quills, a type of American panpipe made from cane reeds; later, he picked up the guitar. On the twenty-three recordings he made from 1927 to 1929, he sings a variety of songs and accompanies himself on guitar and at times on the quills.



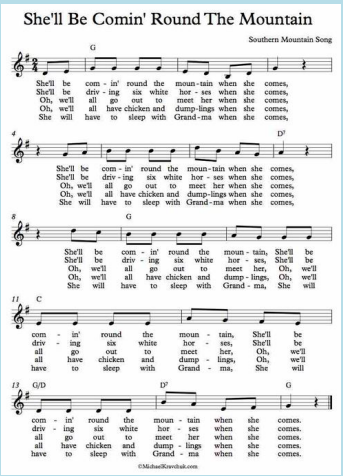
The range of Thomas's work makes him something of a transitional figure between the early minstrel songs, spirituals, square dance tunes, hillbilly reels, waltzes, and rags and the rise of blues and jazz. Basically his repertoire, which mostly consists of dance pieces, was out of date by the turn of the century, when the blues began to grow in popularity. Thomas's nickname, *Ragtime Texas*, is thought to have come to him because he played in fast tempos, which were synonymous for some musicians with ragtime. Five of Thomas's pieces have been characterised as *Rag ditties*, among them *Red River Blues*, and such rag songs have been considered the immediate forerunners and early rivals of blues.

Out of Thomas's twenty-three recorded pieces, only four are classified as blues, so that he has been looked upon as more of a predecessor rather than a blues singer. It has been said that Thomas's blues are original for him and that few, if any musicians seem to have performed his songs. However, Thomas's *Bull Doze Blues* ends with the four bar *Take Me Back*, a Texas standard of the World War I period, which Blind Lemon Jefferson recorded around August 1926 as *Beggin' Back*. Perhaps the most indicative of Thomas's transitional position between the early black music and jazz is his *Cottonfield Blues*, which contains several standard blues themes: such as field labour, the longing to escape, and the role of the railroad in providing an itinerate lifestyle.

Thomas took to the rails to escape from a life of farm work and made a living by singing along the Texas and Pacific lines that ran from Fort Worth and Dallas

to Texarkana. In *Railroadin Some*, he supplies us with his itinerary, which includes, amongst others such towns as Rockwall, Greenville, Silver Lake, Mineola, Tyler (where Thomas was last active in the 1950s), Longview, Jefferson, Marshall, Little Sandy, and his birthplace, Big Sandy, Texas.

Thomas's recordings represent a wide variety of sources for his Texas brand of country music, dating back to a time before the blues became popular and



before they consumed or adapted to many other popular song forms. This perhaps accounts for the fact that three of Thomas's songs - are not really based on the blues, but may have taken the name as a way of capitalising on the Blues growing popularity. According to research, *Fishing Blues* and *Woodhouse Blues* are of vaudeville origins, while *Red River Blues* has been loosely related to *Comin' Round the Mountain*, published in sheet music form in 1889, deriving from an earlier spiritual.

The importance of Thomas's recordings as something of a compendium of the popular song forms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, is enhanced by the similar range of instrumental techniques found in his work with guitar and quills. In a sense, Henry Thomas represents a link between the roots of black music in Africa, Nineteenth and Twentieth century, American folksongs, and finally the coming of the blues—all of these contributing in turn to the formation of jazz in its various forms, all of which are reflected in the rich tapestry of rhythmic, tonal, and thematic expression practiced by *Ragtime Texas* decades before he made his series of recordings from 1927 to 1929.

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