Fixin’ the blues
Kokomo Arnold’s variations on Feels so good
by Daniel Droizhe

The edition in 1991 of Kokomo Arnold’s Complete recorded works in
chronological order (on the Austrian Document collection) allows a closer
look at a “bottleneck wizard” of pre-war blues and at his musical evolution.

James ‘Kokomo’ Arnold (born in 1901 at Lovejoy Station, Georgia) began
recording in Memphis in May 1930, but the real start, as it is
well-known, took place in September 1934 with his Milk cow blues and Old
original Kokomo. Those songs opened two patterns which were frequently
repeated by Kokomo until the end of his recording career, in May 1938.
Their history has been carefully evoked by Steve Call, Nick Perls, Michael
Stewart and others. Milk Cow Blues, played in open D tuning ‘a half step
low’, was the prototype for Sagefield woman blues (same Sept. session), Old
black cat blues, Sissy man blues, Back door blues (Jan. 1935), Biscuit
roller blues, Stop jar blues, Black Annie (Feb. 35), etc.2 The textual
similarities linking Sagefield woman blues and Sissy man blues to Robert
Johnson’s Dust my broom have also been frequently stressed.

More interesting here is an observation made on the cover of the Georgia blues
1927-1933 by Yazoo’s writers, Kokomo’s “unique manic aura” in
Paddlin’ blues - the first song he recorded would derive “not only from
Arnold’s speed but from his shifts from an original twelve-bar pattern to a
ten and eight-bar measure”. An artist belonging to Charley Patton’s era was well
aware of the resources offered by variations in bars and chords combinations.3
When he feels, at the end of the fourth January-February 1935 sessions, that routine has taken too much room in his recordings, he borrows
from Tampa Red Things ‘bout coming my way, a nine-bar blues pertaining to
the Come on in my kitchen family. This unusual structure will be
counted by Elmore James into an eight-bar scheme which is far more
popular nowadays (It hurts me too), possibly due to the extension of the binary
distribution characterizing measures 1-4.

We find a similar type of “standardization” in the evolution of Feels so
good, recorded in Chicago on January 18th 1935, characterized by his
opening breaks in the first four bars, which bestows to the song a sort of
Dirty dozens favour. The stanzas with vocals approximately comprise
fifteen bars - we would say: fifteen and a half - divided into two sequences, the
sung part and the traditional bridge. The latter are separated by a cut
falling around the third beat of the eleventh bar. If we restore the suggested
chords (designated by I, IV, etc.), the scheme could be:

\[
\text{Sung part: bars 1-4, 4.1-5-6-IV/7-8, 9-V/10-IV/11-I:1}
\]
\[
\text{Bridge: I:1:2-12-15:1:21}
\]

When the sung part is followed by an instrumental stanza, the latter begins
in the same way, that is to say on the third beat of bar 11, and then
offers the classical twelve bars. Those enjamments give much vivacity to a
pattern also connected, by its lyrics contrasting to burlesque and non-sense, with the Dirty dozens type.

Monday morning blues was recorded less than one month after Feels so
good (still on vol. 1). The previous scheme is made definitively uniform, with its
reducing to a strict twelve-bars formula reinforced by a clearer harmonic
succession of chords I, IV and V. Another month separates from this
recording You should not due it, which returns to some extent to the first
structure, but with the same clearer treatment as in Feels so good. Within a
slower tempo, the sung parts have here a definite sixteen-bars length mostly
alternating with twelve-bars instrumentals. Something of the Dirty dozens
narrative prototype remains in the couplet where the opening breaks are
extended from eight to twelve bars.

The fixed character of the pattern increases in ‘Cause you’re dirty and
Doin’ the doo-dipidy, as it can be seen from the table below: the stanzas are
designated by A, B, C, etc., and printed in italics when they are instrumental;
the numeral indicates the number of bars. We have now the
same regular succession: one twelve-bars instrumental + two sixteen-bars
sung parts. The previous free-setting of instrumental parts has disappeared.
Of course, the fact that Doin’ the doo-dipidy was recorded with piano
accompaniment must have been determinant, in fixing the structure and

I can’t get enough of that stuff in some manner shows the accomplishment
the evolution, by a general equalization to twelve bars, in sung parts and
instrumental ones. The piece is part of seven recordings made in New York
(and no more in Chicago) during February 1936. The appeal of the urban
blues duct “a la Leroy Carr” could explain Roosevelt Sykes’ performing on
some of those songs (Kokomo had already recorded the famous How long
how long blues). It is also striking that his guitar sound has changed,
becoming more suggestive of the National steel-instruments, while previous
recordings have (to my ears) a ‘wooden-tone’. Which role was played here by
the association of the National with Scratchwell Blackwell, Bumble Bee Slim,
etc.? Seemingly, it was most fashionable to be seen with it, as indicated by a
famous Poetic Wheatstraw photograph.

And we can understand that the people at Decca were expecting a
refreshment in Kokomo’s production, because he was extenuating his Milk
cow through mere textual variations: Southern railroad blues (April ’35),
Tonic head blues (June), Traveling rambler blues (July). The formula left
some room for evoking the more bitter actuality of urban life, like in Policy
wheel blues. But Hobo blues and Lonesome southern blues were kept
unissued (the latter was very close to Front door blues, with a possible
reminiscence of Buddy Boy Hawkins’ Scratch it back). Some renewal came from
camselfing to the Mississippi Sheiks (Stop, Look and Listen) or from the
Louisiana tradition, with Busy boomin’. But the last Chicago sessions make
sensible the need for new inspiration.

Let us conclude. The variations through which went the Feels so good
scheme suggest a typical confrontation with urban culture. Rural arts,
besides their affiliation to strong patterns given by traditions, enjoy some
latitude where the individual can express the fancy of private entertainment.
Urban life may have a tendency to stiffen those patterns or make them more
regular, according to mass-culture and its economic constraints of wider
consuming. Blues history is, of course, deeply determined by this
dissemination. Like Kokomo Arnold’s free-form way of playing slide,
the highly imaginative and imaginative artistry developed by the Memphis Jug
Band, the Cannon Jug Stompers, Bo Carter or Memphis Minnie couldn’t
outlive its own success and was condemned (especially with the rise of the
blues band) to simplifications paving the way for the most deceptive
expressions of “modern blues”.

Editor’s note: Kokomo Arnold’s complete recorded work is available on
DOCD 5037-5040

1 See esp. The Georgia Blues 1927-1933, Yazoo 1012; Kokomo Arnold &
Casey Bill Weldon, Bottleneck guitar transcribers of the 1930’s, Yazoo
1049, The roots of Robert Johnson, Yazoo 1073.
2 It can be noticed that the timing in DB remained unchanged from the 1934
session to the following one, but the reproduction in the Austrian collection
is close to C, which induces some slowing down.
3 See our contribution to Charley Patton. The voice of the Delta, ed. R.