

Fixin' the blues Kokomo Arnold's variations on Feels so good

by Daniel Droixhe

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 others¹. *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*, *Slop 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 combinations³. When he feels, at the end of the four 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 converted 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* flavour. 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:

Sung part = bars 1-4:I / 5-6:IV / 7-8:I / 9:V / 10:IV / 11¹⁻³:I
Bridge = 11³⁻⁴ + 12-15¹⁻²:I

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 enjambments give much vivacity to a pattern also connected, by its lyrics confining 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 definitely 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 a'done 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 doopididy*, 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 doopididy* was recorded with piano accompaniment must have been determinant, in fixing the structure and

lengthening the interpretation (if this last song has no closing instrumental stanza, it is obviously because time was lacking, according to pre-war recording constraint).

The type <i>Feels so good</i> with breaks on the first 4 or 8 bars in stanzas with vocals					
<i>Feels so good</i> (18 Jan. 35)	<i>Monday morning blues</i> (12 Febr. 35)	<i>You should not a'done it</i> (15 March 35)	<i>'Cause you're dirty</i> (14 June 35)	<i>Doin' the doopididy</i> (23 Jul. 35)	<i>I can't get enough of that stuff</i> (18 Febr. 36)
A 12	A 12	A 12	A 12	A 12	A 12
B 15 1/2	B 12	B 16	B 16	B 16	B 12
C 15 1/2	C 12	C 16	C 16	C 16	C 12
D 11 1/2	D 12	D 12	D 12	D 12	D 12
E 12	E 12	E 16	E 16	E 16	E 12
F 11 1/2	F 12	F 16	F 16	F 16	F 12
G 12	G 12	G 20	G 12	G 12	G 12
H 15 1/2	H 12	H 16	H 16	H 16	H 12
I 11 1/2	I 12		I 16	I 16	I 12
J 12			J 12		
K 12					
L 15 1/2					
M 15 1/2					
N 12					

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 duet "à 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 ear) a "wooden-tone". Which role was played here by the association of the National with Scrapper Blackwell, Bumble Bee Slim, etc.? Seemingly, it was most fashionable to be seen with it, as indicated by a famous Peetie 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' *Snatch it back*). Some renewal came from borrowing to the Mississippi Sheiks (*Stop, look and listen*) or from the Louisiana tradition, with *Busy bootin'*. 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, despite 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 innovative and imaginative artistry developed by the Memphis Jug Band, the Cannon Jug Stompers, Bo Carter or Memphis Minnie could not 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 Document Records*: "Kokomo Arnold Vol. 1 - 4 (1930-38)" - Document DOCD 5037-5040

¹ See esp. *The Georgia Blues 1927-1933*, Yazoo 1012; *Kokomo Arnold & Casey Bill Weldon, Bottleneck guitar trendsetters 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. Sacré, Liège, 1984.