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SEARS ROEBUCK SELLS THE COUNTRY BLUES

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During the late 1920's and most of the 1930's one of the largest markets for country blues records was the rural mail order market. Hundreds of thousands of blues records were sold through the mail by record companies, record shops, and mail order houses. For nearly ten years the largest mail order house in the United States, Sears Roebuck and Company, released blues items on a series of house labels, or sold, through their catalog, records on a similar label released by companies who seemed to have cooperated with Sears' sales policies. The result was a series of blues records with uniform labels taken from a variety of sources, some of which were listed in Sears catalogs and some of which seem to have been handled on a retail basis in the company's stores in larger cities. The Sears catalog lists give an appearance of uniformity and simplicity, but the company label covers one of the most confused and confusing collection of leased and purchased masters of the period. The material on Sears' Silvertone, Challenge, Conqueror, and Supertone labels came from nearly every major recording company, and in the 1930's when Conqueror label had become one of the American Recording Corporation's group of labels, material found its way into the Sears lists from A. R. C. masters.

This is not intended to be a comprehensive listing of the Sears Roebuck blues records. This is intended, rather, to be a short introduction to Sears Roebuck's sales policies and practices. Often discographical listings are almost meaningless without some knowledge of the market the records were intended to reach and the success with which the company found this market. This aim of this introduction is to sketch in the broad background against which the Sears Roebuck blues list must be placed and to give a small insight into the country blues themselves.

The company's catalogs before the fall of 1926 sold a variety of dance and vocal recordings on their brown label Silvertone Record, selling for \$.49 plus postage. They advertised -

*"High in quality. Musically and Mechanically perfect.
The only cheap thing about them is the price."*

To go with the records there were steel and fibre needles, phonograph mainsprings and parts, reproducing heads, empty record albums, and the popular "record repeaters" that lifted the needle back to the beginning of a record. One section of the record lists advertised ~ Vocal-Negro Songs", but the records were minstrel style songs by Al Bernard or Ernest Hare. Probably the rural Negro market bought more guitars than phonograph records. Prices ranged from \$3.49 for the cheapest model to \$19. 95 for the deluxe mahogany, rosewood, mother-of-pearl inlaid model.

The catalog was published by the main offices in Philadelphia, but there were three distribution centers in the South, Atlanta, Memphis, and Dallas. Recordings by Negro artists were beginning to sell more and more widely in rural areas, and it is not surprising that the company soon added a number of race items to the catalog. In the catalog for Fall-Winter 1926-1927, at a new price for Silvertone Releases of \$.39,

there are listed several race recordings, including Silvertone 4038 and 4040, piano solos by "Fred (Jelly Roll) Morton," and 4029 by the Red Onion Jazz Babies. The new releases were listed as "Selections by Negro Artists" and despite the presence of "Ladd's Black Aces," a Memphis Five release, there were a number of exciting performers, including city blues singers like Josie Miles, Josephine Beatty, Mae Alix, and Alberta Jones. There was one country blues release advertised, Silvertone 4042, Sundown Blues and Stove Pipe Blues, by Daddy Stove Pipe. To order it the customer used a master catalog number, 12T6201, the record number, 4042, and sent in \$.39 plus postage for shipping weight of 1 5/8 pounds.

In the fall of 1927 a cheaper line of records, Challenge Records, were added to the catalog. They sold for \$.24 each, 10 for \$2.29. There were no new blues releases advertised, but most of the Silvertone items were still listed. The agricultural slump of the late '20's seemed to be forcing prices down and in the Spring of 1929 the Silvertone label was discontinued and there were three labels taking its place. Challenge releases were now selling at 3 for \$.65, post paid, a considerable reduction, a new Conqueror label, 3 for \$.89, post paid, and the - "NEW! IMPROVED!" Supertone label at \$.43 each post paid. Most of the earlier race items were dropped from the catalog and only five records, all on Conqueror, were listed as "Selections By Negro Artists". Two of them, Conqueror 7070 and 7080, were by the Atlanta gospel artist, Reverend J. M. Gates. The record lists were being drastically cut, but the guitar situation had considerably improved. For \$9.98 a deluxe model with colored scenes of Waikiki Beach on the front, back, and sides would be shipped in the South.

For a number of reasons, perhaps largely because the company's catalogs weren't able to keep up with new artists, the race releases sold poorly. By the summer of 1930 only two releases were listed. One of them, Conqueror 7070, "Baptise Me" and "Dying Gambler" by Rev. Gates, was from the older list, but the other, a tasteless recording by "Mandy Lee", "I Needs Plenty Grease In My Frying Pan" and "Crap Shooting Papa, Mama Done Caught Your Dice", Conqueror 7081, was a new release. It was to be the most successful race item the company had tried, remaining in the catalog until 1936. For the next four years Sears neglected race material, preferring to add to their popular country and folk releases.

In the spring of 1934 the company made an effort to sell race records again. The price of Conqueror had dropped to \$.19 if bought in lots of ten, \$.20 for lots of five, and \$.21 apiece, and the master catalog number had been changed to 12D6401. There were four country blues releases added to the list, all of them very interesting.

8242 Highway No. 61 Blues/Red Ripe Tomatoes	Kelly's Jug Band
8243 Seaboard Blues/Troubled In Mind	Bessie Jackson
8244 Jesus, Gonna Make Up My Dying Bed/ Blood Red River	Joshua White
8245 Howling Wolf Blues/Downhearted Man Blues	Joshua White

Kelly's Jug Band was the Jack Kelly's South Memphis Jug Band from Perfect label, and the record was very successful on Conqueror. Joshua White was, of course, the young singer now known as Josh White. Not only were there exciting blues items, but the country singers could now buy new, heavy toned all-metal guitars for \$32.50.

The fall catalog added two new blues releases.

8271 Lay Some Flowers On My Grave/ There's A Man Goin' Around Taking Names Joshua White
8329 Red Cross Blues/You're Gonna Need Me Alabama Sam

The popular 8242, 8244, 8245, and Mandy Lee's 7081 were still listed, but the Bessie Jackson release had been dropped. The other labels, Challenge and Supertone had been discontinued in 1932, but through more attention to popular country artists the Conqueror releases were selling steadily. The surface quality was very poor, but the rural audience has never seemed to be very concerned with record fidelity.

There was another cut in price in the new 1935 catalogs, reducing the price to two for \$.39, and two releases, 8419 and 8431, were added, both of them by Mitchell's Christian Singers. In the fall of 1935 the price went up again, to two for \$.45, and four new blues releases were added.

3479 Milk Cow Blues/Black Gal Pinewood Tom
8491 Early in The Morning No. 2/Dices' Blues Walter Roland
8492 New Mean Mistreater Blues/DBA Blues Pinewood Tom
8499 Bed Spring Blues/Sissy Man Pinewood Tom

"Pinewood Tom" was the popular Josh White, and for the first time Sears seemed to have a popular Negro blues artist. The Depression was still severely limiting record sales, but the Kelly's Jug Band release and Josh White's releases seemed to have caught on. The Mandy Lee record was finally dropped. The success was too good to last. There had been a slight improvement in the economic situation, but in 1936 there was a new slump. Under the new heading "Race Records" there were only two releases, both obscure religious performances. The blues records were dropped from the catalog.

In the fall of 1936 Sears began remaindering the old Victor catalog at six for \$. 55, adding only a few new releases. There were two new blues records, the last to be advertised before the second World War,

8641 I'm A RattleSnakin' Daddy/Somebody's Been Playing With That Thing Blind Boy Fuller
8658 Flood Water Blues Parts 1 and 2 Levee Joe

Perhaps the tasteless Blind Boy Fuller release was intended to take the place of "I Needs Plenty Grease In My Frying Pan." The 1937 recession finished its chances. The new catalog listed only a single page of records, with two religious race items. The Fuller release was listed again in the fall of 1937, but it was discontinued the next spring.

Sears Roebuck did not try to sell country blues again in the years before the second World War. Their half-hearted efforts to promote a blues line had been largely unsuccessful. Only one important release, the Kelly's Jug Band release, and only three important singers, Josh White, Walter Roland, and Blind Boy Fuller, found their way into the catalog. In the catalog pages there is only a scattering of blues material, but more important, there is a glimpse of the policies and methods of a mail order house selling the country blues.