

# The Many Faces of "Milk Cow Blues"

A Case Study

Jean A. Boyd and Patrick Kelly



for THE FIRST TIME... TRANSCRIBED... ALL  
THE CHOICE BOB WILLS FAVORITES... MUSIC  
THAT MADE THE TEXAS PLAYBOYS THE  
NATION'S TOP WESTERN MUSICAL OUTFIT

A Sure-Fire Audience Builder for Your Station  
A Powerful Selling-Vehicle for Your Sponsors

TIFFANY MUSIC, INC.  
BOB WILLS TRANSCRIPTIC



“The blues is a personal statement made in musical terms which is nevertheless valid for all members of a society.” —Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History*<sup>1</sup>

Frank Tirro’s definition of blues noted above is a broad one, but it contains the essential components for this study of the many incarnations of the song “Milk Cow Blues.” “Milk Cow Blues,” technically a rural blues, has survived in many times and places and has had different iterations in various divergent cultures and genres. This study will focus on “Milk Cow Blues” in the African-American blues context and its transition to a Western-swing standard. How does the structure of a blues, such as “Milk Cow Blues,” facilitate its appropriation by different societal groups? What changes occurred in the music and text of “Milk Cow Blues” to alter its meaning for the two groups under consideration? Is the result of such alteration still a blues? These are questions that we will attempt to answer in this article. But first, why focus on “Milk Cow Blues” as the subject of this case study? The answer is that this one unassuming blues number has been in use since the 1920s, has been reinvented by various communities with different cultural identities and genres, and continues to be reworked today.

Several individuals are credited with originating “Milk Cow Blues,” or at least first recording it. The most often cited is Chicago-based bluesman Kokomo Arnold. Born James Arnold in Lovejoy’s Station, Georgia, on February 15, 1901, the child whose stage name would one day be “Kokomo” grew up working in the fields, picking cotton, as did many African-American boys in the Deep South at the beginning of the new century. Arnold was probably self-taught as a guitarist, perhaps with the help of his cousin, John Wiggs. It may have been Wiggs who showed Arnold how to put a bottleneck (knives could also be used) “onto the little finger of the fretting hand and ‘sliding’ it up and down the strings of a guitar to produce a spine-chilling and almost vocal sound.”<sup>2</sup> Keith Briggs notes that Kokomo Arnold laid the guitar across his lap, “dobro-style and ran a glass across the strings. He was left-handed and he had a somewhat erratic sense of time—but he was probably the fastest bottleneck guitarist ever to record.”<sup>3</sup>

From Georgia, Arnold moved north, first to Buffalo, New York, then to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Gary, Indiana, working in steel mills and playing clubs. In the late 1920s, he travelled south again, to Glen Allen, Mississippi, where he learned a new and more lucrative trade—bootlegging. Although he continued to work in nightclubs, bootlegging remained his principal occupation until the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. By 1929, Arnold had moved back north, this time to Chicago, the bootlegging capital of the country. In Chicago, both the bootlegging business and the blues business were more intense and competitive, but Arnold plied both trades until bootlegged alcohol became unmarketable in 1933. After that he was forced to depend on his music and his job as a janitor in a steel mill.

Arnold first recorded in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1933 for the Victor label under the name “Gitfiddle Jim”. For this session, he waxed “Rainy Night Blues” and “Paddlin’ Blues.” Even though these recordings had limited success in terms of sales, they introduced the unique style for which Arnold was recognized throughout his career. In *The Big Book of Blues*, Robert Santelli writes:

“Arnold’s trademarks were his wild and unpredictable sense of time, his penchant for sliding the bottleneck up and down the neck of his guitar as fast as possible, and his occasional use of the vocal falsetto to accent or embellish his guitar antics.”<sup>4</sup> Describing “Paddlin’ Blues,” Santelli notes that on the recording, the tune “was played with such speed that Arnold’s voice could hardly keep up with his fingers.”<sup>5</sup>

Between September 1934 and May 1938, Arnold was under contract with the Decca label. During those years, he cut 88 sides—seven of which are lost, although several others became big hits.<sup>6</sup> Arnold’s first two Decca tracks were among his most popular. “Old Kokomo Blues” was a cover of Scrapper Blackwell’s “Kokomo Blues,” named for a popular brand of coffee. Arnold’s cover was the source of his recording and stage name. The second hit from this first Decca session was “Milk Cow Blues.” Both of these tracks were later covered by other artists: “Kokomo Blues”

years and his relationship with Mayo Williams was deteriorating. It was all to end in the following year when Kokomo decided that Williams was not dealing fairly with him and broke away from recording altogether. He had never been a committed bluesman anyway, having, he felt, many other rows to hoe. Not that you would have guessed that from the quality of the recordings that he made during his last sessions; from the contemporary blues reportage of “Mean Old Twister” through to his final, aptly named, display piece “Something Hot,” he maintained an enviable level of excellence.<sup>10</sup>

James “Kokomo” Arnold died of a heart attack on November 8, 1968, at the age of 67.<sup>11</sup> He left behind a string of hits, including “You Should Not ’A Done It,” “The Twelves (The

Arnold’s trademarks were his wild and unpredictable sense of time, his penchant for sliding the bottleneck up and down the neck of his guitar as fast as possible, and his occasional use of the vocal falsetto to accent or embellish his guitar antics.

was transformed into “Sweet Home Chicago” by Robert Johnson, and “Milk Cow Blues” became “Milk Cow Blues Boogie,” as performed by Elvis Presley (Sun Records, 1954).<sup>7</sup>

In 1938, after recording as a soloist and with various other artists—including vocalist Mary Johnson (ex-wife of Lonnie Johnson), vocalist Alice Moore, pianist Peetie Wheatstraw, and Oscar’s Chicago Swingers, with whom he backed Lovin’ Sam Theard—Arnold left recording, although he apparently continued to play in the clubs of Chicago into the 1940s.<sup>8</sup> In 1959, record producers Marcel Charvard and Jacques Demetre rediscovered Arnold and tried to convince him to record once again. He showed no interest and also insisted that he no longer owned a guitar, which according to his friend Willie Dixon was not true.<sup>9</sup> Why would a successful recording artist stop making records and then refuse to return to the recording studio? Briggs explains:

For him [Arnold] music was just another way of making money that was better than working in the mill. He was good and he was popular but he was much less flexible, both musically and personally, than someone like [Big Bill] Broonzy or Chicago’s other slide guitar star, Tampa Red ... [By] March 1937, he had been with Decca for two and a half

Dirty Dozen),” “Monday Morning Blues,” “Things ’Bout Coming My Way,” “Sittin’ On Top of the World,” “Lonesome Southern Blues,” and “Hobo Blues.”<sup>12</sup>

Arnold was an interesting and unique blues figure for whom playing and recording blues was a good way to earn a living. He apparently did not worry about his reputation or his place in blues history—yet his recordings of “Milk Cow Blues” seem to have been the ones most influential on later artists. Arnold recorded no fewer than four different versions of “Milk Cow Blues” within approximately one year. He waxed the first, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 1, on September 10, 1934, and the second, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 2, on January 18, 1935. Arnold cut “Milk Cow Blues” Nos. 3 and 4 during the same recording session on September 11, 1935. All four performances feature similar guitar accompaniment figures and tunes but different texts, the common thread being the ongoing theme of a lost milk cow. Figure 1 presents the variances in the text from the first two versions that Arnold recorded.

A comparison of these two texts is enlightening in terms of Arnold’s performance of rural blues. At first glance, these are two different texts sung to approximately the same tune. The only point of similarity rests in the reference to a milk cow, which of course, represents a woman—the main character’s lover. The

**Figure 1:**

Kokomo Arnold, "Milk Cow Blues" No. 1, recorded September 10, 1934, in Chicago, Illinois, and "Milk Cow Blues" No. 2, recorded January 18, 1935, in Chicago, Illinois. Both texts were transcribed from the recordings on the CD *Kokomo Arnold: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1 (17 May 1930 to 15 March 1935)* (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1991).

**"Milk Cow Blues" No. 1****Verse 1**

All in good morning, I said, "Blues, how do you do?"  
All in good morning, I said, "Blues, how do you do?"  
You're mighty rare this mornin', can't get along with you.

**Verse 2**

I cannot do right, baby, when you won't do right yourself.  
I cannot do right, baby, when you won't do right yourself.  
Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord, don't want nobody else.

**Verse 3**

Now you can read out your hymnbook, preach out your  
Bible,  
Fall on your knees and pray, the good Lord will help you.  
Cause you gonna need, gonna need my help someday.  
Mama, if you can't quit your sinnin', please quit your  
low-down ways.

**Verse 4**

Yes, I woke up this mornin' and I looked out a door,  
Still I know my family's milk cow, pretty mama,  
by the way she lows.  
Lord, if you see my milk cow, buddy, I say please  
drive her home.  
Said, I ain't had no milk and butter, mama, since  
my milk cow been gone.

**Verse 5**

Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come  
fallin' down.  
Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come  
fallin' down.  
Said, I feel, Lord, I'm a dog, mommy, please don't  
dog me 'round.

**Verse 6**

Takes a rockin' chair to rock, mommy, a rubber ball to roll,  
Takes a tall cheesin' black, pretty mommy, to pacify my soul.  
Lord, I don't feel welcome, please, no place I go,  
Oh that woman that I love, mommy, have done drove me  
from her door.

**"Milk Cow Blues" No. 2****Verse 1**

Says, I woke up this mornin' with my milk cow on  
my mind,  
Says, I woke up this mornin' with my milk cow on  
my mind,  
I get to thinkin' 'bout my milk cow leavin', woo-oo,  
just couldn't keep from cryin'.

**Verse 2**

Oh, god, please help me find my cow,  
Oh, god, please help me find my cow,  
Said, I wants to churn some milk and butter,  
I want to churn that stuff right now.

**Verse 3**

Said, she ain't no high yellow, she's just a tall, cheesin' black,  
Said, she ain't no high yellow, she's just a tall, cheesin' black,  
Says, she got that sweet milk and butter, woo-oo, that stuff  
I sure do lack.

**Verse 4**

Now, you can pull down your window, pull down your  
window blind,  
Now, you can pull down your window, pull down your  
window blind,  
Now don't let your next door neighbor hear you when  
you whine.

**Verse 5**

Now, if you see my milk cow, buddy, please drive  
her home to me,  
Now, if you see my milk cow, buddy, please drive  
her home to me,  
Put a ticket on that heifer and send her C.O.D.

**Figure 2:**

Kokomo Arnold, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 3, recorded September 11, 1935, Chicago, Illinois, and “Milk Cow Blues” No. 4, recorded during the same session. Both texts were transcribed from the recordings on the CD *Kokomo Arnold: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 2 (18 April 1935 to 21 February, 1936)* (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1991).

**“Milk Cow Blues” No. 3**

**Verse 1**

Well, I got myself a milk cow and she keeps me always blue,  
Well, I got myself a milk cow and she keeps me always blue,  
'Cause she don't do nothin', woo-oo, but drink and ballyhoo.

**Verse 2**

Well, my milk cow likes the whiskey, and she craves a  
gang of men,  
Well, my milk cow likes the whiskey, and she craves a  
gang of men,  
Said, you can take a half a pint of ol' cranko, woo-oo, leave  
her in a lion's den.

**Verse 3**

Everybody's always wonderin', "What's the matter with my  
milk cow today?"  
Everybody's all a' wonderin', "What's the matter with my  
milk cow today?"  
Long as she gives sweet milk and butter, woo-oo, she sure  
can't drive me away.

**Verse 4**

Says, I milked my milk cow early this mornin', just at the  
break of day,  
Well, I milked my milk cow early this mornin', just at the  
break of day,  
And I had to plea Black Annie, to please keep that bull away.

**Verse 5**

Now, I ain't gonna call no doctor and I ain't gonna call no  
hoodoo man,  
Says, I ain't gonna call no doctor, I ain't gonna call no  
hoodoo man,  
I'm gonna send that bull to the undertaker, please don't  
ballyhoo.

**“Milk Cow Blues” No. 4**

**Verse 1**

I can't get my milk in the mornin', I can't get  
my cream no more,  
I can't get my milk in the morning, can't get my  
cream no more,  
And I want somebody to come and help me get this bull  
from my door.

**Verse 2**

Said, I went out to my barn this morning, he didn't have  
one word to say.  
Said, I went out to my barn this morning, he didn't have  
one word to say.  
He was layin' down by my heifer's side, please, on  
a pile of hay.

**Verse 3**

Then I walked away and I hung my head and cried.  
Said, I walked away and I hung my head and cried.  
Said, I feel so lonesome, I ain't got my heifer by my side.

**Verse 4**

Now, there's nothing that I could do, for that ol' bull out-  
zeroed me.  
Now, there's nothing that I could do, for that ol' bull out-  
zeroed me.  
When I get myself another heifer, I'm gonna move back to  
Tennessee.

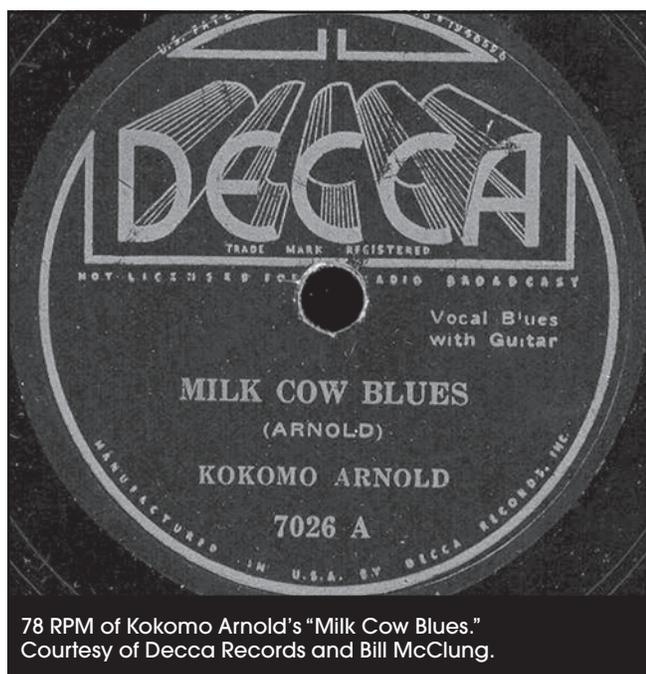
**Verse 5**

Said, I'm still in love with my milk cow, I just can't stand  
the way she do.  
Said, I'm still in love with my milk cow, I just can't stand  
the way she do.  
I don't mind her drinkin' her whiskey, but for something he  
will understand.

first set of words includes three four-line stanzas, all of which introduce greater detail to the narrative. Verse three includes a religious note; verse four is the first reference to the main character's missing the sexual attention of the woman, and verse six informs the listener that the woman has driven him away. Stanzas one, two, and five, each three lines long, provide relief from the otherwise downhearted story. The musical setting, like

the poetry, is irregular in its phrase lengths and rhythm patterns.

In his second recording of “Milk Cow Blues,” Arnold further elaborates on the main character's condition. Still suffering from the loss of the woman, he focuses on his desperate state and makes no mention of the woman's faults. When the two texts are read in sequence, the second reads as a continuation of the first. However, stylistic differences exist between the



78 RPM of Kokomo Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues."  
Courtesy of Decca Records and Bill McClung.

two versions. Most notably, "Milk Cow Blues" No. 2 consists entirely of three-line stanzas and both the poetry and music are more regular than in "Milk Cow Blues" No. 1. These latter features also apply to Arnold's third and fourth "Milk Cow Blues" recordings. (See Figure 2.)

Recorded one year and a day after Arnold's first "Milk Cow Blues," versions three and four suggest attempts to recreate its initial success. In "Milk Cow Blues" No. 3, the text offers a more detailed account of the main character's concerns with the woman in question. He even gives his milk cow a name, "Black Annie," and warns off a rival "bull" who threatens to steal her. "Milk Cow Blues" No. 4 provides a climactic final chapter to the storyline, when the main character discovers the woman is involved sexually with another man. He walks dejectedly away with a sense of resignation that he has lost her to his rival. The sequential nature of the two texts is heightened by the fact that they were recorded during the same session.

The fact that Arnold was driven to revisit the milk-cow theme four times in his brief recording career is one indicator of the commercial success of his first "Milk Cow Blues" release and of the popularity of the milk-cow image among blues audiences. An important element in deciphering the blues and a particular target audience for a blues performance is the understood meanings of its textual metaphors. Evidence suggests that the milk-cow metaphor had appeared in black blues circles well before Arnold released his four recordings. One of the earliest uses of the milk cow as a type of nature code in early blues appears in Sara Martin's "Mean Tight Mama," recorded for the Okeh label in December 1928. A contemporary of Ma Rainey,

Martin was a polished entertainer who had been performing on the black Vaudeville circuit since 1915 and recording since 1922. She wrote or cowrote many of the songs that she sang, including "Mean Tight Mama." Martin's lyrics follow:

#### Verse 1

I'm a mean tight mama, I go to sleep and wake up mad,  
I'm a mean tight mama, I go to sleep and wake up mad,  
But the man who knows his business will find out I'm not  
so bad.

#### Verse 2

I'm a one-man woman but men don't like my kind,  
I'm a one-man woman but men don't like my kind,  
They always want a gal who has a dozen men on her mind.

#### Verse 3

Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk,  
Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk,  
But the cow that's black and ugly has often got the sweetest  
milk.

#### Verse 4

When a man starts jivin' I'm tighter than a pair of shoes,  
When a man starts jivin' I'm tighter than a pair of shoes,  
I'm a mean tight mama, with my mean tight mama blues.<sup>13</sup>

This text is a bragging-type discourse on the main character's sexual prowess. Carol Batker writes that "the lyrics of the classic blues clearly demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which class issues structured sexual politics during this period."<sup>14</sup> Batker adds, "Sara Martin's 'Mean Tight Mama' reinforces the opposition between middle and working class, representing the working class as sexually more expressive."<sup>15</sup> Martin's lyrics, while acknowledging male expectations of unfettered sexuality among working-class black women, portray her subject as defying this stereotype. Her strength and sexual potency are presented as exceptional by virtue of her loyalty as a "one-man woman." The visual image of the lowly milk cow carries with it a strong sense of domestic stability. The "sweetest milk" rewards a man who takes care of the woman, appreciates her value, and is faithfully committed to her.<sup>16</sup>

Son House offers a man's perspective on this analogy in his recording of "My Black Mama, Pt. 1," waxed for Paramount on May 28, 1930, in Grafton, Wisconsin. House's lyrics follow:

#### Verse 1

Oh, black mama, what's the matter with you?  
Said if it ain't satisfactory, don't care what I do.  
Hey mama, what's the matter with you?  
Said if it ain't satisfactory, baby, don't care what I do.

**Verse 2**

Say, ain't no heaven, say, there ain't no burnin' hell,  
 Say, where I'm goin' when I die, can't nobody tell,  
 Oh, there ain't no heaven, oh, there ain't no burnin' hell,  
 Oh, where I'm goin' when I die, can't nobody tell.

**Verse 3**

Well, my black mama's face shine like the sun,  
 Oh, lipstick and powder sure won't help her none,  
 My black mama's face shine like the sun,  
 Oh, lipstick and powder, well, they sure won't help her none.

**Verse 4**

Well, you see my milk cow, tell her to hurry home,  
 I ain't had no milk since that cow been gone,  
 If you see my milk cow, tell her to hurry home,  
 Yeah, I ain't had no milk since that cow been gone.

**Verse 5**

Well, I'm going to the racetrack to see my pony run,  
 He ain't the best in the world but he's a runnin' son of a gun,  
 I'm going to the racetrack to see my pony run,  
 He ain't the best in the world but he's a runnin' son of a gun.

**Verse 6**

Oh Lord, have mercy on my wicked soul,  
 Wouldn't mistreat you, baby, for my weight in gold,  
 Oh Lord, have mercy on my wicked soul,  
 Wouldn't mistreat you, baby, for my weight in gold.<sup>17</sup>

Son House's "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" was an important forerunner to Kokomo Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues" for several reasons. Stylistically, it is performed in a country-blues manner similar to Arnold's with House's open-tuned guitar the only foil to his voice, as opposed to the ensemble-driven, urban rendering of Martin's "Mean Tight Mama." Key similarities also exist in the lyric tone and structure that go beyond the obvious "send my milk cow home" couplet in verse four of "My Black Mama, Pt. 1." In the first verse, House sings:

Oh, black mama, what's the matter with you?  
 Said if it ain't satisfactory, don't care what I do.<sup>18</sup>

Arnold conjures the same sense of frustration with his wayward mate when he sings:

I cannot do right, baby, when you won't do right  
 yourself.  
 Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord, don't want  
 nobody else.<sup>19</sup>

Both House and Arnold express ambivalence towards religion, with House's statement being more pointed:

Say, ain't no heaven, say, there ain't no burnin' hell,  
 Say, where I'm going when I die, can't nobody tell.<sup>20</sup>

Arnold questions whether religion can help his cause:

Now you can read out your hymnbook,  
 preach out your Bible,  
 Fall on your knees and pray the good Lord will  
 help you.  
 Cause you gonna need, gonna need my help  
 someday.  
 Mamma, if you can't quit sinnin', please quit your  
 low-down ways.<sup>21</sup>

Both men share a love-hate relationship with their respective women and both want them back. House seems to shoulder some measure of responsibility for her leaving:

Oh Lord, have mercy on my wicked soul,  
 Wouldn't mistreat you, baby, for my weight in gold.<sup>22</sup>

Arnold places blame squarely on the woman's conduct:

Lord, I don't feel welcome any place I go,  
 Oh that woman that I love, mommy, done drove  
 me from her door.<sup>23</sup>

Another significant similarity between House and Arnold's versions is the use of the four-line stanza. This was one of the more progressive features of Arnold's first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" and was among the elements that influenced the work of Robert Johnson. House's use of the four-line stanza was a clear precedent for Arnold's in terms of articulation. The rapid-fire, patter-like rhythms in Arnold's first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" are almost identical to those used by House in "My Black Mama, Pt. 1." In his four-line verses, House imposed an ABAB arrangement of phrases rather than the more typical AAB; Arnold used yet another four-line-phrase arrangement, ABCD, introducing different wording over the same rhythmic phrasing in each line. Johnson adopted Arnold's formula in his recording of "Kind Hearted Woman," waxed on November 23, 1936, in which he sandwiched the four-line stanza bridge-like between standard three-line verses. Johnson also adapted Arnold's falsetto howl on the third and fourth lines of his bridge. Johnson's final recording, "Milkcow's Calf Blues," from June 1937, features a similar guitar riff to that of Arnold's original, but mixes in verse material borrowed from House's "My Black Mama, Pt. 1."

Other "Milk Cow Blues" recordings from the years preceding Arnold's hit are less similar to "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" and to Arnold's recordings. The most curiously incongruent of these is

the "Milk Cow Blues" waxed by Sleepy John Estes in Memphis on May 13, 1930. Estes's record features an accompaniment provided by piano and mandolin, and at no point in the song's lyric is the milk cow character introduced. The story portrays a secret, adulterous affair that ultimately drives Estes's subject into a debilitating, drunken-like depression, which, in turn, leads to tuberculosis:

#### Verse 1

Now asks sweet mama, lemme be her kid,  
She says, "I might get boogied, like to keep it hid."  
Well, she looked at me, she began to smile.  
Say, "I thought I would use you for my man a while."  
"That you just don't let my husband catch you there."  
"Now, just—just don't let my husband catch you there."

#### Verse 2

Now went upstairs to pack my leavin' trunk,  
I never saw no whiskey, th' blues done made me sloppy drunk.  
Say, I never saw no whiskey, blues done made me sloppy drunk.  
Now, I never saw no whiskey, but the blues done made me sloppy drunk.

#### Verse 3

Now, some says "a dream," some said, "it was mean,"  
"But it's the slow consumption killin' you by degrees."  
"Lord, it's the slow consumption killin' you by degrees."  
"Now, it's the slow consumption an' it's killin' you by degrees."<sup>24</sup>

The vast difference in verse structure and musical texture, together with the close chronology of recording dates for House's "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" and Estes's "Milk Cow Blues," indicate that the two songs were conceived independently. Furthermore, it would appear that Estes's version was not directly inspired by Sara Martin's record. Estes's contribution to the milk-cow lineage, however, is perhaps indicative of just how deeply and widely ingrained the metaphor had become in blues culture by 1930. Estes's title would have suggested to a contemporary blues listener the premise of a black woman who provided the kind of "sweet milk" and domestic security for Estes's subject that would have understandably led to his subsequent downfall upon her rejection. Estes's song, therefore, becomes a testimony to the dire consequences befalling one man as he suffered from a case of the milk cow blues.

One other notable addition to the milk-cow blues tradition leading up to Arnold's work was recorded by Big Bill Broonzy in New York circa 1933:

#### Verse 1

When I got up this morning, she had ev'ry dime I had,  
When I got up this morning, she had ev'ry dime I had,  
I said, "That's all right, milk cow, your daddy understands."

#### Verse 2

My milk cow had me fooled, she had t' have ev'rything she need,  
My milk cow had me fooled, she had t' have ev'rything she need,  
Now, these times they done got hard, baby, she can't eat burs and weeds.

#### Verse 3

I haven't seen my milk cow in three long weeks today,  
I haven't seen my milk cow, mama, three long weeks today,  
I haven't had no rich cream, mama, since my milk cow strolled away.

#### Verse 4

Have you seen a big brown milk cow? She had no horns at all.  
Have you seen a big brown milk cow? She had no horns at all.  
You don't need no chair to milk her, she will back right in your stall.

#### Verse 5

If you see my milk cow, please drive her to my door,  
Mind, if you see my milk cow, please drive her to my door,  
I was really good to my milk cow, I wonder, "Where did my milk cow go?"

Broonzy was one of the most polished, calculating, and commercially minded country-blues performers of his time. Given his predisposition to a market demand-based philosophy, it is not surprising that Broonzy would offer his own milk-cow product to a blues audience already steeped in the popular image's meaning. Broonzy's "Milk Cow Blues" reinforced the theme established by Sara Martin that a woman who is like a milk cow requires a substantial degree of devotion and maintenance but rewards her partner(s) with "rich" love and devotion in return. Broonzy's "Milk Cow Blues" bears enough similarity to House's recording to suggest that he may have at least heard House's version. The evidence does not preclude, however, the possibility that the "please send my milk cow home"-themed lyric is simply an example of the type of wandering line so prevalent in the blues tradition. Arnold's use of the bull imagery in his third and fourth versions of "Milk Cow Blues" also finds precedence in another Broonzy recording, "Bull Cow Blues." Nevertheless, this coincidence lends more credence to the probability that "bull cow" coding, as well as "milk cow" coding, had currency with blues audiences of the time.

The predecessors of Kokomo Arnold's four releases of "Milk Cow Blues" bring the discussion back to Arnold himself and his importance beyond the African-American world of country blues. Arnold's fame spread far beyond Chicago. He became a national star whose name would have been known by blues fans everywhere.<sup>25</sup> His country-blues style was embraced by urban and rural black audiences alike. For African Americans who had migrated to the cities in search of opportunity, Arnold's records provided a portal to their rural roots by appealing to a sense of nostalgia for the simpler times amid the noisy, filthy congestion of urban neighborhoods. At the same time, Arnold's skill as a country-blues performer made him a favorite among young blacks who had stayed behind to work the plantations of the South as sharecroppers or modest landowners. A master's thesis published in 1942 interviewed members of 100 families living on the King and Anderson plantations near Clarksdale, Mississippi, and asked about the residents' favorite songs. Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues" was listed among those records most popular with interviewees belonging to the youngest demographic.<sup>26</sup>

Analysis of the music of these four recordings affirms the basic understanding of the process of creating and recreating the blues. Arnold takes short guitar-solo breaks between vocal phrases, in a call-and-response duet involving his own voice and that of his guitar. What Robert Santelli refers to as Arnold's characteristic "wild and unpredictable sense of time"<sup>27</sup> could also be described as an extremely fluid treatment of the 12-bar blues rhythmic structure. Arnold's performance builds on an underlying quarter-note pulse that holds consistently around 100 beats per minute. His guitar fills, however, move freely from straight to swung eighth-notes and from driving triplets to syncopated 16th-note bursts without ever settling into any one subdivision of the beat for more than a measure or two. At times it sounds as if there are two different tempos happening at once, only to have the accents converge on the quarter-note pulse briefly before Arnold inserts yet another guitar fill with a distinctly different subdivision and accent placement. Arnold's masterful control over his guitar playing is always subservient to his vocal phrasing, which is articulated in rhythms that seem to float over the instrumental texture, further adding to the rhythmic complexity of the performance.

One important observation discussed in Patrick Kelly's thesis and supported by this study is the idea of the 12-bar blues form as a fluid container in which to pour expressive details. Those expressive details were and remain more important than overarching form among African-American blues performers. For solo country-blues performers such as Kokomo Arnold, the stretching and shortening of form was just another way of putting their stylistic fingerprint on a performance.<sup>28</sup>

The four Arnold recordings of "Milk Cow Blues," varied

in text and slightly in musical setting, serve to underscore a fundamental feature of his songwriting style that sets him apart from other commercially successful bluesmen of this time. Elijah Wald has observed that Kokomo Arnold was not a "careful songwriter," adding that Arnold's songs "were simply collections of more or less random, floating verses, which he undoubtedly assembled differently on different occasions, or strung together into one long song that we only hear slices of on his three-minute recordings."<sup>29</sup>

Variances in lyrics and music relate to the spontaneous creation and recreation through improvisation of each performance, recorded and not recorded. Undoubtedly, Arnold altered musical and textual phrases each time he played and sang "Milk Cow Blues," drawing on an endless supply of oral-tradition musical figures and textual turns-of-phrase and imagery. Each time he did this, he added to the catalogue of possibilities upon which other performers could build their own versions of "Milk Cow Blues." This speaks clearly to the question of who deserves credit for originating a specific blues in the oral tradition—and the answer is nobody in particular. Rather than being problematic in terms of blues and popular music development, this freedom to recreate is fundamental to the continuation of both. David Hatch and Stephen Millward use "Milk Cow Blues" to illustrate this process in their book, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music*:

Throughout the history of pop music, development has consistently involved both continuity and change. Each set of performances which has been perceived, at the time or with hindsight, as crystallizing a new tradition invariably blends new elements or structures with recycled ones. Thus the transformation of one or more traditions typically combines the exploitation of and contributions to existing traditions ... This filtration obviously adds to the richness of the traditions in pop music. And it is far from being a recent phenomenon ... Elvis Presley's version of Sleepy John Estes's "Milk Cow Blues," called "Milk Cow Blues Boogie" by Presley, owed more to versions by Bob Wills and possibly to other western swing recordings than to Estes's original ... The process is not merely sequentially additive. With several musical generations of interpretations to choose from it is possible for a new band to choose any one version or, of course, elements from a combination of all those available.<sup>30</sup>

Though the authors of this article disagree with the pivotal status Hatch and Millward assign to Sleepy John Estes's version of "Milk Cow Blues," we do subscribe to the process

of development in popular music that they detail in their book, especially as we follow "Milk Cow Blues" into the genres of Western swing and rock.

"Milk Cow Blues," which held properties of identity for African Americans in the early 1900s, had an entirely different meaning for white Western-swing fans in the American Southwest who added it to their repertory of dance favorites. "Milk Cow Blues" became popular with Western-swing audiences in the late 1930s and 1940s and retains its "favorite" status today. The fact that this tune is a blues was of little consequence to white audiences, and catalogue advertisements for Arnold's original "Milk Cow Blues" made no allusions to any kind of sexual premise. Instead, they feature a comic-book-style caricature of a hapless milk cow while touting the song as "the greatest record ever made."<sup>31</sup> The overtly sexual aspects of the milk-cow code that carried deep, cultural meaning with black blues audiences were neatly sanitized by the Western-swing crowd. White listeners chose to ignore the sexual innuendos in the lyrics and to treat them as humorous and only slightly risqué. Apparently, their main concern was that Western-swing bands laid down a heavy and quite regular beat to which they could dance.

Since it followed the basic form of the blues, "Milk Cow Blues" was a favorite of players for whom its simple structure provided ample opportunity for improvised solos. The musicians who created Western swing were among the most skilled players of their time and place. The draw of the blues for white musicians of the Southwestern-swing tradition, such as Cliff Bruner, Cotton Thompson, Aubrey "Moon" Mullican, and Junior Barnard, was its form and unique aesthetic. For musicians who have internalized the blues form and mastered the syntactical elements of its content, the blues is a musical playground for improvisation. Its formal simplicity allows for a kind of free-wheeling expression not so easily rendered over more complex harmonic progressions.<sup>32</sup> The "cry" of the bent blue note has found a place in virtually every popular genre to evolve in America since the 1920s. It has also found resonance internationally, most famously in 1960s England, where such artists as the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton blended it with their own unique aesthetic experience to create modern rock. Given the ability of black American blues to appeal to musicians across such wide cultural and geographic distances, it is little wonder that the music would find a deep resonance among white Southwestern American musicians who experienced the development of the rural and urban blues in far closer proximity to their own homes.

Western swing had its greatest appeal among white, Southwestern audiences who were rapidly transitioning from a rural to urban existence during the 1930s and 1940s. The Depression era that spawned Western swing was fraught with

tension between the old, rural way of life and the new, industrial, urban experience. Country-blues musicians, such as Kokomo Arnold, were marketed to newly urbanized blacks, just as Western-swing dances catered to rural whites who increasingly found work in the cities.

The blues itself had developed in African-American culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a way of mediating the tension between the old and new.<sup>33</sup> The end of slavery created a whole new set of problems for free blacks. Jim Crow in the South along with his urban cousin, James Crow in the North, created an environment for African Americans that in many ways resulted in a living climate just as difficult and demeaning as slavery itself. The blues form represented tradition, i.e., "the old," while the ever-changing, improvisational content was a musical commentary on the present, i.e., "the new."

This dynamic has worked in the same way in every culture that has embraced the blues. It has, of course, manifested along different relative terms in each case and the authors by no means suggest that the harsh plight of emancipated African Americans was in any way directly comparable to the struggles faced by Depression-era whites forced by financial hardship to leave their farms and ranches. However, it is important to recognize that the blues has performed vital cultural work, besides its obvious value as pure entertainment, for a variety of listeners living under many different social circumstances.

In their discography of Western swing, Cary Ginell and Kevin Coffey note that the first 78-rpm, Western-swing recording of "Milk Cow Blues" was made by a Houston area band—Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers—on February 5, 1937, at the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio.<sup>34</sup> Bruner, who emerged as one of the outstanding fiddlers of the Western-swing genre, began his career with Milton Brown's Musical Brownies in Fort Worth. After Brown's death as the result of an automobile accident in 1936, Bruner worked for a time with "Pappy" Lee O'Daniel's Hillbilly Boys and then formed his first Texas Wanderers band in Houston. While fronting his own band, Bruner also worked with Louisiana country-music recording artist and politician Jimmie Davis. At some point in late 1936—Bruner was never specific with dates—he left Houston and Davis and moved to Chicago for some months in the winter. He was young and bored and had never been to Chicago, although he had heard of its reputation as a musical hotbed. In Chicago he was contacted by a bar owner who was attempting to redefine his bar as a Western club and wanted to hire a country band. Bruner put together a combo for the Corral Club and helped the owner redecorate in a Western motif. Bruner stated that this Corral Club combo was one of the best bands he had ever fronted. However, he eventually became homesick for Texas and returned to Houston, where he organized another Western-

**Figure 3:**

Kokomo Arnold, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 1, recorded September 10, 1934, in Chicago, Illinois, transcribed from the recording of “Milk Cow Blues” on the CD *Kokomo Arnold: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1 (17 May 1930 to 15 March 1935)* (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1991), compared to “Milk Cow Blues,” recorded February 5, 1937, at the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio, Texas, by Cliff Bruner’s Texas Wanderers, transcribed from the recording of Bruner’s “Milk Cow Blues,” on the CD *Texas Music* (Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 1994).

**Kokomo Arnold’s first version****Verse 1**

All in good morning, I said, “Blues, how do you do?”  
 All in good morning, I said, “Blues, how do you do?”  
 You’re mighty rare this mornin’, can’t get along with you.

**Verse 2**

I cannot do right, baby, when you won’t do right yourself.  
 I cannot do right, baby, when you won’t do right yourself.  
 Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord, don’t want nobody else.

**Verse 3**

Now you can read out your hymnbook, preach out  
 your Bible,  
 Fall on your knees and pray, the good Lord will help you.  
 Cause you gonna need, gonna need my help someday.  
 Mama, if you can’t quit your sinnin’, please quit your low-  
 down ways.

**Verse 4**

Yes, I woke up this mornin’ and I looked out a door,  
 Still I know my family’s milk cow, pretty mama, by the way  
 she lows.  
 Lord, if you see my milk cow, buddy, I say please  
 drive her home.  
 Said I ain’t had no milk and butter, mama, since my milk  
 cow been gone.

**Verse 5**

Said, my blues fell this mornin’ and my love come  
 fallin’ down.  
 Said, my blues fell this mornin’ and my love come  
 fallin’ down.  
 Said, I feel, Lord, I’m a dog, mommy, please don’t  
 dog me round.

**Verse 6**

Takes a rockin’ chair to rock, mommy, a rubber ball to roll,  
 Takes a tall cheesin’ black, pretty mommy, to pacify my soul.  
 Lord, I don’t feel welcome, please, no place I go,  
 Oh that woman that I love, mommy, have done drove me  
 from her door.

**Cliff Bruner’s version****Verse 1**

I’m howlin’ “Good mornin’, blues how do you do?”  
 I’m howlin’ “Good mornin’, blues how do you do?”  
 I went away this mornin’, ’cause I can’t get along with you.

**Verse 2**

Now, I can’t do right, baby, when you don’t do right  
 yourself.  
 I can’t do right, baby, you don’t do right yourself.  
 Now, if my good gal quits me, I don’t want nobody else.

**Verse 3**

Piano Solo Chorus

**Verse 4**

Now, I woke up this mornin’, I looked outdoors,  
 I know my mama’s milk cow, I can tell the way she lows.  
 Now, if you’ve seen my milk cow, woo, won’t you drive her  
 on home.  
 Now, I ain’t had no milk and butter, woo, since  
 my cow’s been gone.

**Verse 5**

Fiddle Solo Chorus

**Verse 6**

Now, blues fell this mornin’, and my love come fallin’ down,  
 My blues fell this mornin’, and my love  
 I’d be a low down dog, mama, but please don’t  
 dog me around.

swing band. At the beginning of 1937, Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers recorded "Milk Cow Blues" for the Decca label.<sup>35</sup>

Did Cliff Bruner hear a recording of "Milk Cow Blues" in Chicago or perhaps hear Kokomo Arnold perform the number in a Chicago club? Or, because of the pervasive blues culture in Texas, did he know of it before moving to Chicago? These are questions that only the late Bruner could answer. What is certain is that his was the first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" by a Western-swing group. His Texas Wanderers band for this recording session consisted of a stellar group of Western-swing performers: Bruner was the lone fiddle player and sometimes vocalist; Hezzie Bryant played bass; Fred "Papa" Calhoun, formerly of the Musical Brownies, played piano; Dickie McBride, who would go on to be a Western-swing band leader himself, played guitar and sang; Leo Raley played electric mandolin and provided the vocal on this recording; Red Raley

was a Western-swing band, not a blues band, and its audience expected to be able to dance to this music and to hear solo choruses from their favorite players. Bruner and company inserted instrumental choruses in place of verses three and five of Arnold's recording. The choice of these two verses likely had to do with Bruner's understanding that his fun-seeking audiences would not be interested in mixing religious commentary with Saturday-night dancehall antics. Part of the identity of the white Southwesterners who embraced Western swing was an evangelical, mostly Baptist, mindset that regarded dancing and drinking as sinful. They did not want to be reminded of their transgressions while dancing to "Milk Cow Blues." Bruner's change of the last verse of his version likely occurred in response to his previous edits, which would render Arnold's last verse incongruent in Bruner's cover. Furthermore, neither bandleader Bruner nor vocalist Raley would incorporate a verse about "a tall

---

What is certain is that (Cliff Bruner's) was the first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" by a Western-swing group.

---

also played guitar and sometimes sang; and Joe Thames played tenor banjo.

Texas swing, like the big-band swing of the same era, is ensemble music that is first and foremost made for dancing. The tempos fall within a range comfortable for dancing, and the steadily bouncing beat lends the musical phrasing a relaxed predictability that listeners demand in order to anticipate movement and dance with confidence. In contrast, the rhythmic intricacies typical of Arnold's performances are also designed to create movement, but not in a happy-go-lucky, "get lost in the beat" kind of way. The polyrhythmic texture creates musical tension that supports the lyric. It is a storytelling event with words and music intertwined into a one-time performance, preserved for the ages only by the recording itself. Unpredictable phrase lengths and constantly shifting rhythmic superimpositions are two of the surest ways for a performer or band to clear a dance floor. Given these musical differences, it is similarities in the lyric that tie Bruner's recording to Arnold's first "Milk Cow Blues." (See Figure 3.)

Red Raley's sung lyrics follow Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues" No. 1 text closely. He even copies Arnold's falsetto howls in the signature verse four. Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers' recording of "Milk Cow Blues" appears to be a cover of Arnold's first recording; however, it is a cover with adaptations to satisfy a different audience and genre. Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers

cheesin' black, pretty mommy" into a performance intended for whites. Despite these changes to Arnold's first recording, Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers captured the essence of "Milk Cow Blues" while transforming it into a Western-swing number that would appeal to their audiences.

Was Bruner's the recording that introduced "Milk Cow Blues" into the Western-swing genre, or did bands acquire the tune in other ways? According to Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery—longtime banjoist and historian for the legendary Western-swing group, the Light Crust Doughboys—all of the bands played the same repertory, each in its own unique way. In an interview, Montgomery explained how this worked in the case of Kansas City bandleader Benny Moten's popular tune, "South": Columbia A&R man Art Satherley sent the Moten recording to the Doughboys and asked them to cover it. Montgomery confessed that the band had misgivings about doing so, because the Moten recording was entirely instrumental. However, once the Doughboys' version was released, it became a big seller and was copied by Western-swing bands throughout the Southwest and in California.<sup>36</sup>

Was this the process with "Milk Cow Blues," once Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers released their recording? Did other bands pick up the tune and play and record it each in its own way, or was "Milk Cow Blues" already part of the oral tradition from which all drew? Johnnie Lee Wills, younger brother of

**Figure 4:**

Lyrics, “Milk Cow Blues.” Arnold’s “Milk Cow Blues” No. 1, Bruner’s recording of “Milk Cow Blues,” and Johnnie Lee Wills’s recording, transcribed from the recording of “Milk Cow Blues” on the Johnnie Lee Wills and His Boys CD, *From the Vaults: Decca Country Classics, 1934-1973* (Universal City, California: MCA Records, 1994).

**Arnold’s First Recording**

**Verse 1**

All in good morning, I said, “Blues,  
how do you do?”  
All in good morning, I said, “Blues,  
how do you do?”  
You’re mighty rare this mornin’,  
can’t get along with you.

**Verse 2**

I cannot do right, baby, when you  
won’t do right yourself.  
I cannot do right, baby, when you  
won’t do right yourself.  
Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord,  
don’t want nobody else.

**Verse 3**

Now you can read out your  
hymnbook, preach out your Bible,  
Fall on your knees and pray, the good  
Lord will help you.  
Cause you gonna need, gonna need  
my help someday.  
Mama, if you can’t quit your sinnin’,  
please quit your low-down ways.

**Verse 4**

Yes, I woke up this mornin’ and I  
looked out a door,  
Still I know my family’s milk cow,  
pretty mama, by the way she lows.  
Lord, if you see my milk cow, buddy,  
I say please drive her home.  
Said, I ain’t had no milk and  
butter, mama, since my milk cow  
been gone.

**Bruner’s Recording**

**Verse 1**

I’m howlin’ “good mornin’, blues,  
how do you do?”  
I’m howlin’ “good mornin’, blues,  
how do you do?”  
I went away this mornin’, ‘cause I  
can’t get along with you.

**Verse 2**

Now, I can’t do right, baby, when you  
don’t do right yourself.  
I can’t do right, baby, when you don’t  
do right yourself.  
Now, if my good gal quits me, I don’t  
want nobody else.

**Verse 3**

Piano Solo Chorus

**Verse 4**

Now, I woke up this mornin’, I  
looked outdoors,  
I know my mama’s milk cow, I can  
tell the way she lows.  
Now, if you’ve seen my milk, woo,  
won’t you drive her on home.  
Now, I ain’t had no milk and butter,  
woo, since my cow’s been gone.

**Johnnie Lee Wills’s Recording**

**Verse 1**

Well, I woke up this mornin’ looked  
outdoors,  
I can tell my milk cow, I can tell by  
the way she lows.  
If you see my milk cow, please, drive  
her on home,  
‘Cause ain’t had no milk and butter,  
woo, since my cow’s been gone.

**Verse 2**

Well, you’ve got to treat me right,  
day by day,  
Get out your little prayer book, get  
down on your knees and pray,  
‘Cause you’re gonna need, you’re  
gonna need my help someday.  
Yes, you’re going to be sorry, woo,  
you treat me this way.

**Verse 3**

Piano Solo chorus

**Verse 4**

Well, good evenin’, don’t that sun  
look good going down?  
Well, good evenin’, don’t that sun  
look good going down?  
Now, don’t your bed look lonesome  
when your lover ain’t around.

Figure 4: Continued

<p>Verse 5</p> <p>Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come fallin' down. Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come fallin' down. Said, I feel, Lord, I'm a dog, mommy, please don't dog me round.</p> <p>Verse 6</p> <p>Takes a rockin' chair to rock, mommy, a rubber ball to roll. Takes a tall cheesin' black, pretty mommy, to pacify my soul. Lord, don't feel welcome, please, no place I go, Oh that woman that I love, mommy, have done drove me from her door.</p>	<p>Verse 5</p> <p>Fiddle Solo Chorus</p>	<p>Verse 5</p> <p>I've tried everything to get along with you, And now I'm going to tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm going to stop cryin' and leave you alone. If you don't believe I'm leavin', you can count the days I'm gone. 'Cause you won't see, you won't see my sweet face no more. Yeah, you'll just be wonderin', baby, where in this world I'm gone.</p>
--	--	---

the more famous Bob Wills, is credited in a number of sources with popularizing "Milk Cow Blues." According to Ginell and Coffey, Johnnie Lee Wills and His Boys recorded "Milk Cow Blues" on April 28, 1941, at the Sound Recording Studio in Dallas, Texas, for the Decca label. (Decca Records lists him as Johnny Lee Wills.) Performers on that session included Johnnie Lee Wills playing tenor banjo; Junior Barnard on electric guitar; Harley Higgins on guitar and vocals; Millard Kelso at the piano; Cotton Thompson on fiddle and lead vocals; and Luke Wills on the bass. (See Figure 4 for a comparison of the lyrics from this Johnnie Lee Wills recording with those of Arnold's first version and Bruner's release.)

The "Milk Cow Blues" lyrics sung by Cotton Thompson in the Johnnie Lee Wills version use several key lines from Arnold's original but with significant changes and additions. First, Thompson deploys the signature milk-cow verse as the first stanza of the Wills recording, which helps catapult the song to Western-swing anthem status. This change places the comical element of the story—the milk-cow image—up front for the listeners, before any hint of double entendre is introduced. Second, the Wills version reclaims the religious imagery of Arnold's original. However, both the Bible reference and the call for the wayward lover to "quit your sinnin'" are left out. Thompson replaces these omissions with a plea for the woman simply to treat the main character right "day by day." This change retains some of the religious flavor of Arnold's original lyric without Arnold's ambivalent tone, thus creating a more sympathetic atmosphere for the male subject.

Third, the three-line verse beginning with "Well, good evenin'" that follows the piano solo seems to have been an original addition by singer Thompson. This is not to say that he or some other members of the band had not heard this couplet elsewhere. However, it is interesting to note that the "new" verse follows the same rhyme scheme as Arnold's original fifth stanza. The way in which Thompson drags out his drawled enunciation on this verse is one of the highlights of his vocal performance. The "don't your bed look lonesome" answering phrase is only a mild sexual reference in comparison to the types of coded allusions found in milk-cow-type songs from the black blues tradition and in this case again reinforces a sympathetic tone for the lonely subject.

Finally, there is the extended last verse that also seems to be a Thompson creation—or that of one of his fellow band members. Structurally, this verse has precedence among the milk-cow song family in the similarly extended first verse of Sleepy John Estes's "Milk Cow Blues." Whereas no actual connection in terms of lyrics exists between the first verse of the Estes example and Thompson's final verse, it seems an unlikely coincidence that Thompson would stumble upon the same unusual verse structure in a milk-cow-themed song purely by chance. (See Figure 5.) This evidence of mixing and recasting found lyrics and using borrowed phrase structures is wholly consistent with the practices we have noted in the milk-cow-themed songs from the black blues tradition and also conforms to the Hatch and Millward formula quoted above. Johnnie Lee Wills and his singer, Cotton Thompson, employed these techniques of adaptation

**Figure 5:**

Comparison of structures of John Estes's recording of "Milk Cow Blues," Verse 1, and Cotton Thompson's vocal on the recording of Johnnie Lee Wills's version of "Milk Cow Blues," final verse.

**Estes, "Milk Cow Blues,"**

**Verse 1**

Now asks sweet mama, lemme be her kid,  
She says, "I might get boogied, like to keep it hid."  
Well, she looked at me, she began to smile.  
Say, "I thought I would use your for my man a while."  
"That you just don't let my husband catch you there."  
"Now, just—just don't let my husband catch you there."

**Thompson, vocal, "Milk Cow Blues,"**

**Verse 5**

I've tried everything to get along with you,  
And now I'm going to tell you what I'm gonna do,  
I'm going to stop cryin' and leave you alone.  
If you don't believe I'm leavin', you can count the days  
I'm gone.  
'Cause you won't see, you won't see my sweet face no more.  
Yeah, you'll just be wonderin', baby, where in this world  
I'm gone.

and alteration to design a tune that suited the cultural scene and meshed with the identity of the white Southwesterners who constituted the Western-swing audience.

But what of Cliff Bruner's seminal contribution and its possible influence on Johnnie Lee Wills's approach? Evidence of this can be found in the subtle evolution of the melodic and rhythmic articulation of a key motive in Arnold's original. Example 1 illustrates changes that were made to an important textual-musical phrase of Arnold's original recording.

The top staff of Example 1 shows the vocal melody as sung by Kokomo Arnold over the first four bars of the signature fourth verse to "Milk Cow Blues." The melodic contour, while quite active, is limited largely to whole-step and half-step slurs that revolve around the tonic. The rhythmic phrasing, however, is varied and highly syncopated, qualities that both mark Arnold's vocal style and are idiomatic to African-American blues performance. The middle staff shows singer Leo Raley's treatment of the same phrase on Bruner's recording (this melody has been transposed to C from its original key of G major for purposes of comparison). As discussed above, the quarter-note pulse in Arnold's performance is relegated to the background; it is felt more than heard, so that the emphasis is on the vocal phrasing and constantly shifting accents in Arnold's guitar fills. In Bruner's version, however, the quarter-note beat is prominent in the rhythm section. Raley's vocal phrasing is far more tied to the downbeat accent and slurs are minimal as compared to Arnold's vocal. It is interesting to note that Raley chooses to center his "melody" almost solely on the dominant. Perhaps this was in order to add climactic intensity to this pivotal verse in the song. Whatever the reason, the result is a nearly recitative-like reading with only a few basic syncopations to break up the delivery.

The bottom staff of Example 1 shows the first four bars of Cliff Bruner's fiddle solo before the final verse (also transposed to C major). Here Bruner punches the downbeat relentlessly in a phrase that is clearly modeled on Raley's vocal articulation. The fiddle/violin is one of those stringed instruments that, similar to the slide guitar, can slur notes smoothly and seamlessly, much like the human voice. This makes the fiddle well equipped to approximate the vocal-derived articulations that mark the blues aesthetic. Bruner's use of the interval of a third, with the tonic placed on top, creates the overall harmonic effect of a series of jazzy-sounding sixth chords before he breaks into a more melodically active, swung single-note line in measure four.

The top staff of Example 2 shows Cotton Thompson's vocal rendition of the same four-measure lyric phrase in Johnnie Lee Wills's 1941 recording of "Milk Cow Blues." Taking into account that this is now the opening stanza of the song, Thompson gives the line a sparse, clearly enunciated treatment over the first two measures. His entrance on the "and" of beat one in the second full bar after a full-beat rest gives the phrase a laid-back feel that accentuates the lazy "woke up this mornin'" imagery of the lyric. Measures three and four contain a far more clearly etched melody than that seen in either Arnold's or Raley's performances.

Thompson carries this melodic sensibility over from the first four bars of the fiddle introduction. Here the driving rhythmic repetition suggests a clear reference to the opening bars of Bruner's solo (Example 1, lower staff). However, the fiddler uses open string drones to pad his double stops and create a fuller texture—although he does include a few slurred thirds, as did Bruner in measures three and four.

Are these nuances in the fiddle introduction of Johnnie Lee Wills's version of "Milk Cow Blues" a tip of the hat to Bruner's solo? It is impossible to say for sure, but given Bruner's reputation as one of the great Western-swing fiddlers, it seems

Example 1.

C

Arnold Vocal  
Pt. Says I woke up this mor-nin' and I looked out - doors, says

Raley Vocal  
Pt. I - woke up this morn-in', I looked out - doors. I

Bruner fiddle solo  
Pt.

3  
I know my ma - ma's milk cow, pret - ty ma - ma, Lawd, by 'th way she lows.  
know my ma - ma's milk cow. I can tell the way she lows.

**Example 1:** The top staff is Kokomo Arnold's vocal melody over the first four measures of Verse four in his "Milk Cow Blues." The middle staff is vocalist Leo Raley's melody on the same lyric in the 1937 recording by Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers. The bottom staff is the first four bars of Cliff Bruner's fiddle solo from the same recording. The examples from Bruner's recording have been transposed from their original key of G major to C major for purposes of comparison.

Example 2.

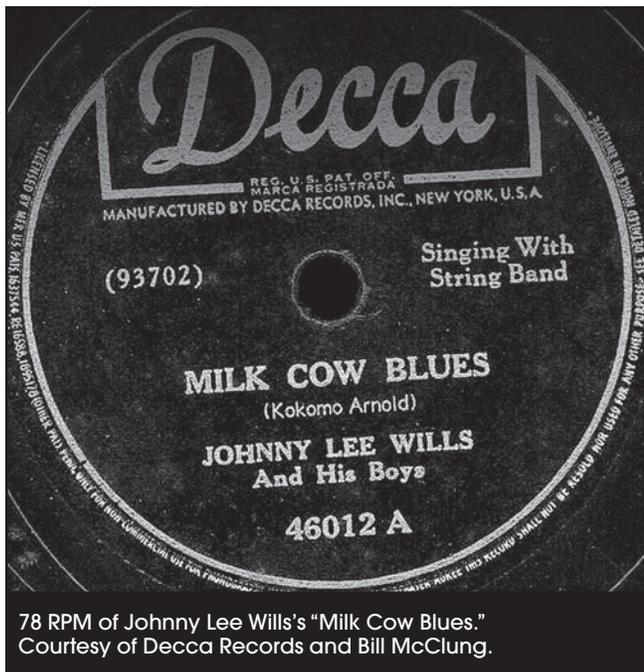
A

Thompson vocal  
Pt. Well I woke up this morn - in, looked out doors,

Thompson fiddle intro  
Pt.

3  
I can tell my milk cow, I can tell by th' way she lows.

**Example 2:** The top staff shows Cotton Thompson's vocal melody over the first four measures of the first verse on Johnny Lee Wills's 1941 recording of "Milk Cow Blues." The lower staff is the first four measures of Thompson's fiddle intro to the same recording.



78 RPM of Johnny Lee Wills's "Milk Cow Blues."  
Courtesy of Decca Records and Bill McClung.

plausible that the fiddler on Wills's version might be inclined to quote Bruner. What is certain is that the fiddle introduction that appears on the Johnnie Lee Wills recording of "Milk Cow Blues" has become the standard introduction for all other Western-swing fiddlers to begin this song. It is the initial call for dancehall listeners to get out of their seats and pack the dance floor night after night. Simply put, if the fiddler is not playing something quite similar to the fiddle introduction on the Johnnie Lee Wills recording, then he/she is not playing the "real" version of "Milk Cow Blues." This insistence on a melodic theme in the fiddle introduction and sung portion of the signature verse of "Milk Cow Blues" belongs to a European-derived aesthetic. Such stringent musical associations would be foreign to traditional blues conventions. Based on his performance on Johnnie Lee Wills's 1941 recording, it was Cotton Thompson, with the support of Johnnie Lee Wills and the rest of his band, who deserves the credit for transforming "Milk Cow Blues" into the format that would become the standard for all other Western-swing bands to follow.

The process by which "Milk Cow Blues" went from a barely concealed ode to sex to a "kick up your heels" dancehall anthem is consistent with other white appropriations of black music. Consider Bill Haley's polite rendition of Big Joe Turner's raunchy "Shake, Rattle and Roll" or Pat Boone's crooning of Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti." In white hands, these songs of potent sexual meaning became far less threatening due to the ways in which they were delivered. When Johnnie Lee Wills's older and more famous brother Bob recorded "Brain Cloudy Blues," a song that was closely related to "Milk Cow Blues," and

then the actual "Milk Cow Blues," he based both on Johnnie Lee's 1941 recording. Perhaps to further delete any suggestive lyrics from these recordings, singer Tommy Duncan replaced Thompson's phrase "don't your bed look lonesome when your lover ain't around," with "don't your home look lonesome when your lover ain't around." This is a tiny adjustment, but it successfully removes overt sexual innuendo from the song.

"Milk Cow Blues" was assimilated into the canon of Western-swing standards, where it remains today. The fiddle motif, verse arrangement, and lyrical turns of phrase that first surfaced on record with Johnnie Lee Wills's band in 1941 most likely evolved gradually over time during nightly performances. Nevertheless, the commercially successful 1941 recording set the standard features of "Milk Cow Blues," and although other Western-swing bands would play and record "Milk Cow Blues" countless times over the next several decades, virtually all would maintain these features with only slight variations. This preserving of the integrity of a particular performance is also more related to a European aesthetic than to the culture of the blues.

Even Cotton Thompson himself added to the "Milk Cow Blues" legacy when he recorded "New Milk Cow Blues" with Texas pianist Aubrey "Moon" Mullican in 1948. For this performance, Thompson sang the following on the extended final verse:

Now, my soul is mighty happy since I found  
somebody new,  
And now I'm going to tell you what I'm gonna do.  
Gonna give you lots of lovin' and I'll always be true,  
When I hear you call your papa, I'll come runnin'  
home to you.  
'Cause I hate, today, that I hung my head and cried,  
I've got a brand new milk cow, woo-oo, and I'm  
satisfied.<sup>37</sup>

Apparently Cotton Thompson, like Kokomo Arnold before him, understood fully the storyline continuum that is a culturally engrained feature of the way in which blues song families propagate.

The most famous of the Wills brothers, Bob Wills, recorded "Milk Cow Blues" after he and vocalist Tommy Duncan waxed a cover with the same tune featuring a different first-verse text, "Brain Cloudy Blues," in 1946 in California for the Columbia label.<sup>38</sup> It is this recording that Hatch and Millward claim provided most of the lyrics for Elvis Presley's 1955 cover, "Milk Cow Blues-Boogie."<sup>39</sup> Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys were headquartered in Fresno, California, in 1946, and their radio show was broadcast on various radio stations throughout the West and Southwest. Because Wills and the band were travelling constantly and could not appear at all of the radio stations that carried the show, they depended on "transcriptions" to fulfill their radio obligations. Transcriptions were recordings

that included not only songs, but also banter among band members, which gave radio audiences the impression that they were hearing the group perform live. The Tiffany Music Company of San Francisco, California, made transcriptions of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys' shows that were copied and distributed to all interested radio stations. Each transcription began with the Playboys' theme song, and then proceeded with a series of other popular selections played by the band. In his comprehensive discography of the Tiffany Transcriptions, Bob Pinson lists Bob Wills's recording of "Milk Cow Blues" in the middle of the list (master number SSR602RE), attributed to Kokomo Arnold with Tommy Duncan as vocalist.<sup>40</sup>

"Brain Cloudy Blues" is an interesting side note in this story. Its arrangement fits the mold set by Thompson and the Johnnie Lee Wills band right down to the obligatory milk-cow fiddle introduction. The most significant change in terms of the lyric is the replacement of the four-line first verse, which carries the milk-cow imagery, with the standard three-line stanza that follows:

My brain is cloudy, my soul is upside down.  
Yeah, my brain is cloudy, my soul is upside down.  
When I get that low-down feelin', I know the blues  
must be someplace around.<sup>41</sup>

The rest of Tommy Duncan's singing mimics Thompson's vocals and text almost verbatim, with only the slightest changes.

Musically speaking, the Bob Wills band adds a stop-time treatment to the extended final verse of "Brain Cloudy Blues," another feature that has become a standard part of "Milk Cow Blues" in Western-swing performances. This climactic addition is punctuated by an ensemble lick borrowed from Benny Goodman's "Moonglow." Wills's subsequent recording of "Milk Cow Blues" brings back the first verse from the Johnnie Lee Wills recording, but retains the stop-time rhythmic treatment in the final stanza with a slightly different ensemble lick to finish the song. Bob Wills's guitarist, Junior Barnard, plays gritty, hard-driving solos on both "Brain Cloudy Blues" and "Milk Cow Blues," and it is entirely possible that Barnard's work on either of these tracks would have caught the attention of Elvis Presley's lead guitarist, Scotty Moore. Barnard's playing style had deep roots in the syntax of the blues, and these tracks display a level of fluency with "gut bucket" blues-guitar phrasing that would not be heard from other white guitarists for at least another decade.

With the above mention of Elvis Presley's recording of "Milk Cow Blues" it becomes clear that this tune has appeared in contexts other than black blues culture and Western swing. In 1954, Presley released his version of this much-loved blues song on the Sun label, renaming it "Milk Cow Blues Boogie." A published sheet-music version of this performance is available online from Musicnotes.com. The text from the online score follows:

#### Verse 1

Well I woke up this mornin' and I looked out the door,  
I can tell that old milk cow, I can tell the way she lowed.  
Now, if you see my milk cow, please rock her up on home.  
I ain't had no milk and butter since that cow's been gone.

#### Verse 2

Well, I tried to treat you right day by day.  
You hide your little pray'r book, get down on your knees  
and pray,  
Boy, you're gonna need your lovin' daddy here someday.  
Well, then you're gonna be sorry you treated me this way.

#### Verse 3

Well, good evenin', don't that sun look good goin' down?  
Well, good evenin', don't that sun look good goin' down?  
But don't that old moon look lonesome when your baby's  
not around.

#### Verse 4

Well, I tried everything to get 'long with you.  
I'm ah gonna tell you what I'm gonna do;  
Ah, I'm ah gonna quit my cryin'.  
I'm gonna leave you alone.  
If you don't believe I'm leavin' you can count the days I'm  
gone.  
I'm gonna leave, you're gonna need your lovin', daddy here  
someday.  
Well, then you're gonna be sorry for treating me this way.<sup>42</sup>

The comparison of lyrics supports Millward and Hatch's observation that it was the elder Wills's recording of "Milk Cow Blues" that was the primary source for Presley's rockabilly adaptation. As we have already noted, Bob Wills's version was a remake with only slight alterations of his younger brother Johnnie Lee's recording. Presley and company begin their rendition with only a plodding acoustic guitar as accompaniment to mimic the mid-tempo quarter-note drive of the Western-swing treatment. After drawling the first two lines of the beginning verse, Presley stops his band and calls for a more up-tempo, rocking approach. The band then launches into the faster rockabilly groove that was their specialty. Lead guitarist Scotty Moore plays a 24-bar solo chorus that suggests the influence of Junior Barnard and has nothing to do with the short answering guitar passages provided by Kokomo Arnold. In this tongue-in-cheek poke at the older swing tradition, Presley underscores the idea that the "Milk Cow Blues," and perhaps popular music in general, has now undergone a changing of the guard. It has been adapted to the cultural aesthetics of a new generation, a tide change in which the blues also would play an important role.

This discussion of the numerous incarnations of "Milk Cow Blues" could go on for many more pages. Such country stars as

George Strait, Willie Nelson, and Tim McGraw; rockers such as Eddie Cochran, The Kinks, Aerosmith, and Elvis Costello; and a variety of Western-swing bands have recorded “Milk Cow Blues” subsequent to the time period under discussion in this essay. In each genre and cultural scene, “Milk Cow Blues” has been altered musically and textually to meet the needs of a different audience, a cultural group in transition attempting to navigate between its past and present, the old and the new.

The reason “Milk Cow Blues” can so readily assume different incarnations relates to the basic nature of the blues, which is always fluid and simple. Modifications include alterations to text and to the rhythm, phrase structure, and basic form of the music. Textual metaphors must be re-crafted to satisfy the belief systems, including matters of race and religion, of each individual cultural group. Changes in its text speak volumes about the cultural identities of the various users of “Milk Cow Blues.” The fluidity and simplicity of the song’s form opened windows of opportunity for blues and Western-swing musicians, as well as their rock-music imitators, to display their improvisatory skills in full virtuosic choruses. Early rock artists, such as Elvis Presley, reconfigured an old form to a new beat, putting rhythm front and center and giving the lead guitar a platform along with the vocals to set a younger generation into motion in the 1950s.

In the mid-1960s, British groups such as the Rolling Stones and Cream took American blues records, including “Milk Cow Blues,” and extracted motifs that, in their original

contexts, were simply improvised licks thrown out in ever-changing performances. Then these British artists recast these motifs and deployed them as recurrent themes around which cover versions could be fashioned with the borrowed thematic material becoming the hook. In this way, rock was modernized to meet the needs of British and American youth living in a world dominated by war and the dissolution of their societies. Throughout the late 1960s and into the present, rock guitarists have become harsher, louder, and have played even longer choruses than did Scotty Moore on the Elvis Presley recording. Drummers have gouged out the rhythms more violently. Audiences have cringed at the volume while getting totally lost in the music itself.

Some music critics and historians argue that country audiences are still looking for “real country music,” that which is genuine and speaks to their lives.<sup>43</sup> For them, “Milk Cow Blues” and all of its blues relatives express the reality of broken relationships and lost ideals. For each culture, past and present, “Milk Cow Blues” has become something different, something explicit to the identities of the members of that culture. In these different contexts, is “Milk Cow Blues” still a blues? In Frank Tirro’s terms—“a personal statement made in musical terms which is nevertheless valid for all members of a society”—the answer is yes. Though “Milk Cow Blues” has changed its face and has been reincarnated many times, it has remained a blues with meaning for each community that adopts it. ★



Elvis Presley at the Big D Jamboree, Dallas, Texas, 1955. Courtesy David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

## Notes

- 1 Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History*, 2nd ed. (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), 47.
- 2 Keith Briggs, liner notes for *Kokomo Arnold Vol. 1 (1930-1935)*, PDF, <http://aamr.alexanderstreet.com/View/313716/Highlight/Kokomo> (accessed June 22, 2010).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 14.
- 5 Ibid., 15.
- 6 Rev. Keith A. Gordon, "Kokomo Arnold Profile," About.com, <http://blues.about.com/od/artistprofil2/p/Kokomo-Arnold-Profile.htm> (accessed June 22, 2010).
- 7 Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, 15.
- 8 Briggs, liner notes for *Kokomo Arnold Vol. 3 (1936-1937)*, PDF, [http://aamr.alexanderstreet.com/View/313717/Highlight/Kokomo Arnold/](http://aamr.alexanderstreet.com/View/313717/Highlight/Kokomo%20Arnold/) (accessed June 22, 2010).
- 9 Briggs, liner notes for *Kokomo Arnold Vol. 4 (1933-1934)*, PDF, <http://aamr.alexanderstreet.com/View/313718/Highlight/Kokomo> (accessed June 22, 2010).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Briggs, *Kokomo Arnold Vol. 1*.
- 13 This text was transcribed from the recording of "Mean Tight Mama" on Sara Martin, *Complete Recorded Works, Vol. 4: 1925-28* (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1996), CD.
- 14 Carol Batker, "'Love Me Like I Like to Be': The Sexual Politics of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women's Club Movement," *African American Review* 32.2 (Summer 1998): 202.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 For a discussion of sexual metaphors and other types of lyrical symbolism found in the music of pioneering Texas blues artist Blind Lemon Jefferson, see Luigi Monge and David Evans, "New Songs of Blind Lemon Jefferson," *Journal of Texas Music History* 3.2 (Fall 2003): 8-28.
- 17 This text was transcribed from the recording of "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" on Son House, Leroy Williams, Willie Brown, Fiddlin' Joe Martin, and Alan Wilson, *Son House* (New York: Columbia Legacy, 2003), CD.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Briggs, *Kokomo Arnold Vol. 1*.
- 20 House, et al., *Son House*.
- 21 Briggs, *Kokomo Arnold Vol. 1*.
- 22 House, et al., *Son House*.
- 23 Briggs, *Kokomo Arnold Vol. 1*.
- 24 This text was transcribed from the recording of "Milk Cow Blues" on Sleepy John Estes, *I Ain't Gonna Be Worried No More, 1929-1941* (Newton, N.J.: Yazoo, 1992), CD.
- 25 Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 127.
- 26 Ibid., 94.
- 27 Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, 14.
- 28 Patrick Kelly, "The Blending of African-American and European Aesthetics in the Guitar Performance of British Blues from 1965 to 1967," master's thesis, Baylor University, 2010, 40-41.
- 29 Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 135.
- 30 David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 1989), 42-43.
- 31 Facsimile of advertisement in Paul Oliver, *Early Blues Songbook: A Collection of Early Blues in Works and Music* (London: Wise Publications, 1982), 40.
- 32 For more on the importance of how the basic blues structure lends itself to improvisation, see Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 67-68.
- 33 For one of the most detailed studies of the history of blues music, see Bill Wyman, *Blues Odyssey: A Journey to Music's Heart and Soul* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2001). For a thorough examination of blues music in Texas, see Alan Govenar, *Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008) and Roger Wood, *Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
- 34 Cary Ginell and Kevin Coffey, *Discography of Western Swing and Hot String Bands, 1928-1942* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Green Wood Press, 2001), 21; For more information on Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers, as well as a number of other western swing bands, see Jean A. Boyd, *Dance All Night: Those Other Southwestern Swing Bands, Past and Present* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2012), 81-92.
- 35 Cliff Bruner, interview by Jean A. Boyd, Houston, Texas, August 14, 1991; transcript in the Texas Collection, Baylor University.
- 36 Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery, interview by Jean A. Boyd, Dallas, Texas, August 29, 1998; transcript in the Texas Collection, Baylor University; quoted in Jean A. Boyd, *We're the Light Crust Doughboys from Burrus Mill: An Oral History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 68.
- 37 This text was transcribed from the recording of "New Milk Cow Blues" on Moon Mullican, *I'll Sail My Ship Alone* (Beckenham, Kent, England: Proper Records, 2002), CD.
- 38 Charles R. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 251.
- 39 Hatch and Millward, *From Blues to Rock*, 25.
- 40 Bob Pinson, "The Bob Wills Recordings: A Comprehensive Discography," in Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*, 352.
- 41 This text was transcribed from the recording of "Brain Cloudy Blues" on Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys, *The Essential Bob Wills: 1935-1947* (New York: Columbia Legacy, 1992), CD.
- 42 Published under license from Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., authorized for use by Jean Boyd, <http://www.musicnotes.com>.
- 43 For a discussion of the "authenticity" of country music and other genres, see Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004); Bill C. Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Rasin': Country Music and the Southern working Class* (Urbana University of Illinois Press, 2002); Jefferey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2004).