

# Charley Patton and His Mississippi Boweavil Blues

*Robert K. D. Peterson*

On June 14, 1929, Charley Patton entered the Gennett recording studios in Richmond, Indiana. There, he cut fourteen songs, which were soon released as 78 rpm records on the Paramount label. Among the songs was “Mississippi Boweavil Blues,” a tune unlike any other in the history of blues music. There are other blues songs about insects, but almost all of them are not really about an actual insect; the insect is merely used as a not-so-subtle sexual metaphor. To understand what makes Patton’s song special, we first need to explore the life of this extraordinary musician.



Fig. 1. This is the only known photograph of Charley Patton (1891-1934).

Patton is among the few truly great figures in blues and one of the more important American musicians of the twentieth century. He founded the Delta blues tradition at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Delta blues (what author Robert Palmer calls “Deep Blues”) is the most important blues form. It is impossible to overstate the impact it has had on modern popular music. Without Patton, modern blues, jazz, and rock simply would not exist as we know it.

So, who was Charley (sometimes spelled “Charlie”) Patton? Born about 1891 near Edwards, Mississippi, he moved with his family to the sprawling Dockery Plantation

in the Delta region of the state around 1900. There, on ten thousand acres, he and his family worked cotton fields like many other African American families during that time. Even though the work was backbreaking and unforgiving, there were vibrant communities in the Mississippi Delta. Juke joints, plantation dances, fish fries, picnics, and all-night frolics were social gathering places and events for plantation workers who needed to be entertained. In walked Charley Patton.

As a boy, he learned to play guitar from Henry Sloan, an older tenant worker at the plantation, about whom virtually nothing is known. Although he didn’t create the blues, Patton created a unique genre by combining field-holler vocal stylings, percussive acoustic guitar (derived directly from West African polyrhythmic drumming), and haunting, high-note accents on the guitar using a bottleneck or knife blade to slide across the frets. Into this mix he added lyrics that directly reflected the southern African American experience at the time. The result was a profoundly moving folk music—the Delta blues. Listening to it, you sense the sticky mud and searing summer heat of the bottomland, the tenant shacks, and eerie spectres at desolate crossroads. You feel the despair, joy, hate, fear, wanderlust, and heartbreak. To put it simply, the Delta blues is the truth. That’s why it resonates so deeply across time and culture.

Patton was no obscure musician in his day. He was a popular performer who entertained African American audiences throughout the Delta. His loud, gravelly voice and guitar showmanship left audiences spellbound and begging for more. He was the first, as far as anyone can tell, to thrill audiences by playing his guitar behind his back

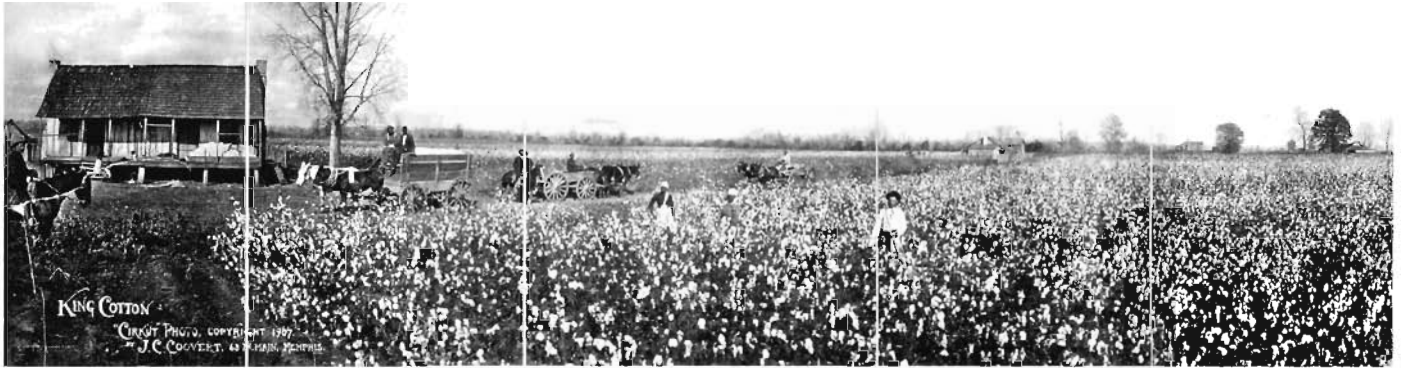


Fig. 2. "King Cotton."

This panoramic gelatin silver photograph, by J. C. Coovert, shows cotton pickers in the deep South. It was taken in 1907, the same year that the boll weevil invaded Mississippi. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. [pan 6a36702]).

and between his knees. Literally sitting at his feet while he played were future blues giants Robert Johnson and Howlin' Wolf. Even though Robert Johnson's acoustic blues would be more urbane than Patton's, and Howlin' Wolf's blues would be electrified as part of the Chicago blues movement of the early 1950's, their blues remained, in essence, Patton's blues.

Although he lived much of his life on the Dockery Plantation, he set up households with different women all over the Delta. His life was stereotypical of a traveling bluesman. He drank heavily, chain-smoked, and was an inveterate womanizer. Small-town jails were second homes to him, and he always had to keep an eye out for jealous men.

Patton's "Mississippi Boweevil Blues" is a fitting example of the deep country blues of the Delta. It is primal blues—one chord accompaniment, three basic notes in the vocal melody, and a high-note bottleneck accent after the vocal phrase. Patton often used the slide accent to finish the last word in the phrase. But the lyrics are what hold the most interest for us.

Sees a little bo weevil keeps movin'  
in the air, Lordie!  
You can plant your cotton  
and you won't get half a bale, Lordie  
Bo weevil, bo weevil, where's your native  
home, Lordie  
"A-Louisiana raised in Texas,  
least is where I was bred and born," Lordie  
Well I saw the bo weevil, Lord,  
a-circle, Lord, in the air, Lordie  
The next time I seed him, Lord, he had his  
family there, Lordie  
Bo weevil left Texas, Lord, he bid me  
"fare ye well," Lordie  
  
(Spoken: Where you goin' now?)  
I'm goin' down the Mississippi, gonna give  
Louisiana hell, Lordie  
  
(Spoken: How is that, boy?)  
Suck all the blossoms and he leave your  
hedges square, Lordie  
The next time I seed you, you know you had  
your family there, Lordie  
Bo weevil meet his wife,

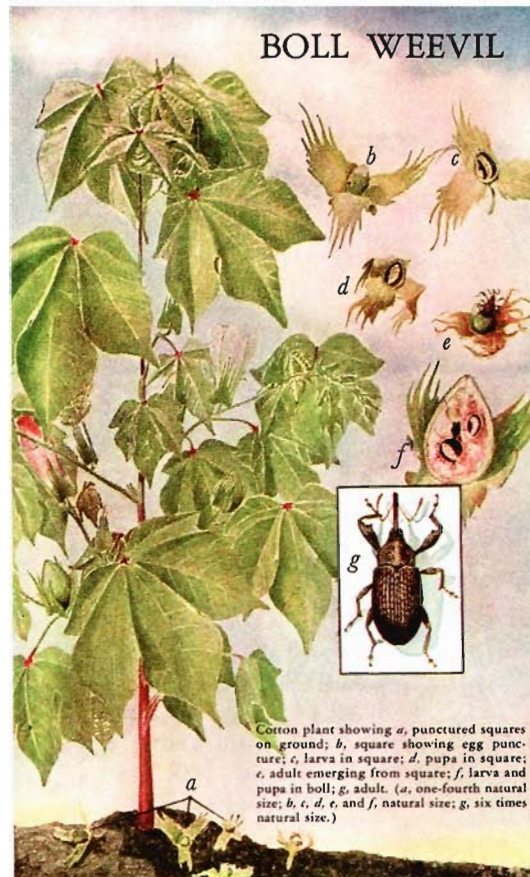
"We can sit down on the hill," Lordie  
Bo weevil told his wife,  
"Let's trade this forty in," Lordie  
Bo weevil told his wife, says,  
"I believe I may go North," Lordie

(Spoken: Hold on,  
I'm gonna tell all about that)  
"Let's leave Louisiana, we can go  
to Arkansas," Lordie  
Well, I saw the bo weevil, Lord, a-circle,  
Lord, in the air, Lordie  
Next time I seed him, Lord,  
he had his family there, Lordie  
Bo weevil told the farmer that "I 'tain't got  
ticket fare," Lordie  
Sucks all the blossom and leave your hedges  
square, Lordie  
Bo weevil, bo weevil, where your native  
home? Lordie  
"Most anywhere they raise cotton  
and corn," Lordie  
Bo weevil, bo weevil,  
"Oughta treat me fair," Lordie  
The next time I did you had your family  
there, Lordie

Patton may have been performing this tune as early as 1910, making it among the earliest of blues songs. By that time, the boll weevil would have been known to nearly everyone in the deep South. Since entering the United States near Brownsville, Texas in 1892, it moved rapidly over the next 30 years to infest 600,000 square miles. In 1907, the first boll weevil was found in Mississippi, and by 1915 populations covered the entire state. The social and economic upheaval wrought by the boll weevil is legendary. Cotton crops failed, land prices sank, farmers went bankrupt, and farm workers fled *en masse* to industrial cities in the north.

Patton saw all of this and his lyrics reveal the devastation and inexorable invasion of the pest as it moved from Texas through Louisiana and Mississippi. The lyrics reflect what he saw directly: tremendous upheaval and uncertainty for the plantation owner, and, especially, for the African American tenants. Yet, at the same time, there is envy for the boll weevil in the lyrics. The boll weevil could go anywhere it wanted; the poor tenant farm

**Fig. 3.** Color drawing of the boll weevil showing life stages and injury to cotton. USDA, 1945. (Color plate from USDA. 1952. *Insects: The Yearbook of Agriculture*. United States Department of Agriculture. Washington, D.C.).



worker could not. The boll weevil had power over the plantation owner; the farm worker did not.

In a 2005 article in the journal, *Popular Music*, Ayana Smith argues that Patton's boll weevil is a metaphor for the signifying trickster, a figure in African American narrative tradition that "flouts the norms of society, using cunning, humor and deceit to obtain personal gain." The trickster is often an animal and Smith reveals that blues songs contain numerous examples of this character type in their lyrics.

What makes Patton's song rare is that it is about the actual damage and movement of an insect. Only two other pre-World War II blues songs are possibly in this category: Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Mosquito Moan" and Furry Lewis's "Mean Old Bedbug Blues," although the mosquito and bed bug also serve as metaphors for no-good women and white men. Other blues songs of this period feature insects, but they are overt metaphors for sex and sexual prowess. Memphis Slim's "I'm an Old Bumble Bee" is a typical example: "I am an old bumble bee / a stinger just as long as my arm / I stings every good-looking woman now / everywhere I goes along." Other songs in this category include "Chinch Bug Blues," "Creeper's Blues," "Yellow Jacket," "Bumble Bee," "Bumble Bee Blues," and "Honey Bee Blues." (The obsession in blues songs with the stinger as a phallic symbol and making honey as a sign of male virility is ironic and comical given that stingers and honey-making are exclusive to female hymenoptera.)

Patton's song evolved throughout the next several decades. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith sang a very different song called "Boweavil Blues." It doesn't seem to be related to Patton's tune in music or lyrics. The boll weevil here is clearly a no-good man: "I don't want no man / to put sugar in my tea / that bug is so evil / I'm afraid he might poison me."

The other boll weevil songs can be traced directly to Patton's version. Other artists have added greatly to the lyrics and it has become much more melodic over the years. Sometime during the late 1930's, the version was transformed into a traditional twelve-bar blues piece with jaunty, humorous lyrics that even included a reference to Paris Green, the arsenical insecticide. Not only are there blues versions (Leadbelly, Pink Anderson, Little Walter, Jaybird Coleman), but also folk (Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger), jazz (Eubie Blake) bluegrass/country (Tex Ritter), R&B (Brook Benton, Fats Domino), and rock (Eddie Cochran, Jimmy Page) versions. Many of the versions were recorded during the folk revival movement of the late 1950's and early 1960's. The titles of the songs also changed; examples include "Bo-weevil Blues," "New Bo Weevil Blues," "Boll Weevil Rag," "The Boll Weevil Song," "Boll Weevil," "Let Me Be Your Bo Weevil," and "Just Lookin' for a Home." A World War II adaptation by Pete Seeger was called "Looking for a Home."

But it all started with Charley Patton. His song is the original and has the deepest links to the boll weevil invasion and the devastation it caused. He recorded several more records for the Paramount and Vocalion labels in 1930 and 1934, and, among the so-called "race" records, his 78's were always strong sellers. But he was not long for the world. He died at age 42 on April 28, 1934 of a longstanding mitral valve disorder in his heart. His last common-law wife, Bertha Lee, was by his side. He is buried in Holly Ridge, Mississippi—near an old cotton gin.

### Discography

- Charley Patton. Mississippi Boweavil Blues. Paramount, Pm-12805. 1929.
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