The Two Poor Boys - Complete Recorded Works (1927-1931)

01. Little Son of a Gun (Look What You Done Done) 02. Two White Horses In a Line 03. John Henry Blues (take 1) 04. John Henry Blues (take 3) 05. New Huntsville Jail (take 1) 06. New Huntsville Jail (take 2) 07. Take a Look at That Baby 08. Mill Man Blues 09. Oh You Son of a Gun 10. Georgia Rose 11. Early Some Morning Blues 12. Cream and Sugar Blues 13. Old Hen Cackle 14. Sitting On Top of the World 15. My Baby Got a Yo-Yo 16. So Sorry Dear 17. Sourwood Mountain 18. Down In Black Bottom (take 1) 19. Down In Black Bottom (take 2) 20. Shook It This Morning Blues Joe Evans - Guitar, Kazoo, Mandolin, Piano, Vocals Arthur McClain - Guitar, Guitar (Rhythm), Kazoo, Mandolin, Piano

So deeply ingrained are perceptions of race and ethnicity in North American culture that certain artists who recorded during the 1920s and '30s have since been assigned to a sort of categorical limbo, as questions regarding whether a musician was of African or European ancestry continue to confound critics, discographers, and music historians. Despite the healthy diversity embodied by variably pigmented musicians capable of playing piano blues back to back with hillbilly string band music, a term like "racially ambiguous" has emerged to indicate that someone inadvertently violated preconceptions about who is supposed to have sounded like whom. Such is the case with mandolinist Joe Evans and guitarist Arthur McClain. Billed as the Two Poor Boys, this little-known pair of rural improvisers hailed from the eastern region of Tennessee -- where black and white players seem to have had a way of sharing musical ideas to a greater extent than was common at the time -- and left about 20 recordings for posterity to ponder. Their available works were reissued by Document in the early '90s. Had Gennett issued more than one of the seven sides this duo cut in Birmingham, Alabama during the summer of 1927, their complete works may not have fit onto one compact disc. As it is, "Little Son of a Gun" is a delightful bit of kazoo-driven hokum, good enough to make one wish that the people in charge at Gennett had also released titles like "Midnight Creepers," "I Want to Ride in Your Car," and "They Wanted a Man to Lead the Lions Around."

What does survive of the Evans and McClain legacy is a marvelous blend of toe-tapping blues

and struts, reflective airs, and full-throttle Appalachian-style breakdowns. It all compares nicely with the works of Chicago-based mandolin handlers Al Miller and Charlie McCoy, as well as legendary backwoods Georgians Peg Leg Howell and Eddie Anthony. Other parallels could be drawn with Kentucky's Kessinger Brothers, Kansas City steel guitarist Casey Bill Weldon, the Dallas String Band, and the Mississippi Sheiks, source of the famous blues standard "Sitting on Top of the World," which the Poor Boys waxed in 1931. (An alternate take of that blues is not included here, nor is a record they chose to title "Boogity Woogity.") Recorded by the Kessingers in 1929 and by Evans and McClain two years later, "Sourwood Mountain" is a traditional fiddle ditty named for a towering land mass that exists northeast of Knoxville. The song would be revisited in 1962 on Frank Proffitt's album Traditional Songs and Ballads of Appalachia. the Two Poor Boys' treatment of "Down in Black Bottom" is closely based upon Bert "Snake Root" Hatton's version of 1927. This blues appears to have originated in St. Louis, for Black Bottom was the name of that city's rough-and-tumble riverfront red-light district. It was also the inspiration for "Don't Go Down in Black Bottom," a cautionary opus recorded by vocalist Black Bottom McPhail with Scrapper Blackwell in 1932 and again in 1938 with backing by Jack Newman and Blind John Davis. Hatton's original may be found on Document's fascinating compilation St. Louis 1927-1933. ---arwulf arwulf, Rovi

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