

Catfish Blues

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 21 November 2009 17:01 - Last Updated Thursday, 12 March 2015 22:23

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I have written much about the *Mississippi Delta*. There is another thing specific to the Delta, which has influenced the blues genre. The flooding of the river created many lakes, creeks and ponds with plenty of fish in them. For 200 years fried fish was a daily element of the Delta inhabitants' menu.

Black people used one word for different species of fish – it was *catfish*.

Catfish Blues is an example of animal symbolism, which was present in the music of the South in the 19th century and first half 20th century. In the 1920s *Blind Lemon Jefferson* sang that he was a Black Snake. Similar themes appeared in the songs of another bluesman from Texas *Paul Oliver*. The blacks were often seen through the white population's eyes as having animal-like characteristics, and they used this as an expression of sexual fantasies.

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The first time we know about, when catfish made an appearance in blues, was in 1928. **Jim Jackson**

recorded the third part of his long hit '

Jim Jackson's Kansas City Blues

' with the recording label Vocalion. Jim Jackson was a star of a medicine-show, which was very popular in several states of the South. Jackson recorded six parts of this blues, one after another. He achieved great success – he sold over one million copies.

In the third part of „Kansas City Blues" Jackson sang:

*'I wished I was a catfish, swimming down in the sea;
I 'd have some good woman, fishing after me.'*

Having made a lot of money, Jackson settled down in Memphis. He became one of the most liked singers in *Beale Street*. One of the members of *Memphis Jug Band*, Dewey Corley remembered: '*I used to see Jim on stage in medicine shows. There was a gang of people behind Jim as long as a freight train. It was just like a carnival*'.

The part with catfish was the one, that was getting the most attention out of Jackson's whole series. Little known today bluesman from the Delta *William Harris* remade the song, slightly

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changing the melody and lyrics. His proposition

*'I wish I was a catfish, swimmin' in the deep blue sea;
I'd have all you women fishin' after me.'*

became a standard in the following years.

Ma Rainey sang '*Don't Fish in My Sea*'. She felt close to Jackson's blues, because she was in a similar medicine-show for a few years. Charlie Patton sang about catfish in

Dockery Farm

, although the exact melody and lyrics are not known today. In 1934 Tampa Red changed

catfish

to

kingfish

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Blues evolved kind of independently. In some cases it's hard to point out the exact author. In the 1930s **Catfish Blues** was known in juke joints and barrelhouses all over the Delta area. It is believed that **Catfish Blues** arose from the activity of a group of

bluesmen, living around the town called

Benton

nia

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They were associated with the pianist *Skip James*, who was born in Bentonia. Apparently, already in the 1920s, Skip James sang about catfish. James was a very interesting character, who deserves a separate note to be written about him.

The first recording was made in 1941 by *Robert Petway*, who was accompanied by the guitarist *Tommy McClennan*. McClennan in the 1930s lived in Yazoo City, near Bentonia. It was possibly then that he came across Catfish Blues.



Robert Petway

In 1950 *Muddy Waters* recorded a remake of the blues. For some reason he later changed the title to **Rollin` Stone**. Under this name the blues made a big impression on the audience during Waters' visit in Europe. This is the origin of the name of both the band Rolling Stones and the music magazine Rolling Stone.

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Muddy Waters

Catfish Blues was performed by many better or less known artists living in the Delta. New recordings have been made even in the recent years. It seems to be a very important blues for the blacks, a part of their soul.

Catfish Blues lyrics, Hendrix version.

Well I wish, I was a catfish

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Swimin in the, the deep blue sea
I have all you pretty women
Fishin after me
Showin up after me
Oh well
Ow well
Oh yeah
Oh yeah

Well I went down
To my girlfriends house
And I sat alone on her front step
And she said a come in outcha man and just your love
I just now left
I just now left
And I say
Who yeah
She said sure enough you did
Who yeah
Who yeah
Who yeah
Oh yeah

Yeah,
Well theres two
Two trains runnin
But theres not a one thats goin my way
You know theres a, one train running at midnight
The other one leave just for day
Leave just for day
Oh well
Yeah

I role and I tumble
Practicly all night long
I role and I tumble
Practicly all night long
Well, my baby dont treat me well
? ?
Yeah

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