

“Sitting on Top of the World”—Mississippi Sheiks (1930)

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Essay by Edward Komara (guest post)*



Mississippi Sheiks

When Polk Brockman set up a field recording session in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1930, the hit he expected to record was “Hello World,” a spoken-word celebrity recording by KWKH radio personality William Kennon (“W.K.”) Henderson, Jr. As Brockman remembered in 1970 for researcher Gayle Dean Wardlow, Henderson was so popular, that “he was harder to get to than the President of the United States was.” But the release of “Hello World” (on the custom label Hello World Doggone 001) proved to be a dud. It was redeemed by another record that Brockman supervised that week, performed by two dusty and unheralded musicians from Mississippi.

Guitarist Walter Vinson and violinist Lonnie Chatmon, although African Americans, performed regularly at dances for whites in central Mississippi. For most of the 1920s, Chatmon was part of a group with his brothers, one of whom was Armenter Chatmon, who had made a successful debut on records in 1928 as Bo Carter. Sometime during the late 1920s, Chatmon and Vinson began performing as a duo. While preparing for a dance in Itta Bena, Mississippi, Chatmon overheard Vinson practicing on a tune he called “Sittin’ On Top Of The World,” and he had to ask, “What kind of song is that?”

It had a tune that may be transcribed in eight measures, having a 4-measure + 4 m. verse-and-refrain song structure. Its recurring refrain words were “Now she’s gone, I don’t worry, I’m sitting on top of the world.” If the melody had any antecedents, it may have been descended from the song “Careless Love,” although its refrain would have been modified by the rhythm of the titular words “I’m sitting on top of the world.” This little change is distinctive enough to make “Sitting on Top of the World” stand out from the other eight-measure songs performed by African Americans across the South in the late 1920s.

Itta Bena is a small town where visiting musicians like Chatmon and Vinson would have performed for one evening, then move the following day to their next performance. So at the time when the two musicians were there developing “Sitting on Top of the World,” it may have been likely that they were noticed by Ralph Lembo, a local entrepreneur who scouted talent for the record labels. He may have known of the forthcoming recording session in January 1930 by Polk Brockman for Okeh Records, and if so, he would have told Chatmon and Vinson to go there.

“They just came in, unannounced and everything,” as Brockman remembered their arrival. Brockman later said that what set these men apart from “the same old guitar and singing deal” was Chatmon’s violin. All of the records made that day were released as being by the

Mississippi Sheiks, the name agreed to by the musicians and the recording supervisor. They set themselves to recording eight songs, double the number that were usually waxed as masters during a commercial session. Two of the songs, "The Jazz Fiddler" and "The Sheik Waltz," were later released in Okeh's 45000 series for white buyers, attesting to the musicians' appeal to whites in Mississippi. The others were meant for African American buyers, including "Alberta Blues" (which was a cover of Bo Carter's "Corrine Corrina" from 1928) and "Stop and Listen Blues" (which was an adaptation of Tommy Johnson's "Big Road Blues" for Victor in 1928). A second fiddler may be heard on "Lonely One In This Town" (which has led the blues discographers Robert M.W. Dixon, John Godrich and Howard Rye in their discography "Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943" to wonder if Bo Carter traveled with the Sheiks as a second violinist).

But "Sitting on Top of the World" (Okeh 8784, with "Lonely One In This Town" on the other side) was the major hit of the recording session, saving Brockman's reputation with Okeh from the brink of commercial loss. "If it hadn't been for them [the Mississippi Sheiks], I would have lost my shirt on that 'Hello, World' deal," he admitted to Wardlow. "I've always said it wasn't the things you planned in recording. The biggest things were accidents, something that just strayed along." The success gave the Sheiks enough popularity to continue making records through the leanest years of the Great Depression; they had follow-up hits for Okeh (1930-1931), Paramount (1932), Columbia (1933, by then having purchased Okeh), and RCA Victor Bluebird (1934-1935).

Lonnie Chatmon died near Bolton, Mississippi sometime in 1942 or 1943. Walter Vinson moved to Chicago in 1940, dying there in 1975. He lived long enough to be rediscovered by white audiences in the 1960s, whereupon he revived the Mississippi Sheiks with Sam Chatmon (Lonnie and Bo's younger brother) as a member.

The song itself took on a life of its own through the many cover versions on records, starting with the early 78s from 1930 and 1931, including two renditions for Paramount by singers Mozelle Alderson and Thomas A. Dorsey (as Georgia Tom), and the Alabama Sheiks for Victor. It was sustained into postwar blues by the 1957 Chess label recording (Chess 1679) by the great singer Howlin' Wolf. It was then introduced into the rock repertory in 1968 by Cream (with singer/bassist Jack Bruce and guitarist Eric Clapton) on the double album "Wheels of Fire" (Atco Records SD 2-700), then it came full circle when Howlin' Wolf, Clapton and other British rock musicians cut a version for the album "The Howlin' Wolf London Sessions" (Chess LP 60008, 1970).

"Sitting on Top of the World" also became a basis for new songs, when musicians sang the melody to new words. One of the first such treatments was circa August 1930 when Charley Patton--a Mississippi Delta bluesman who was close enough to the Chatmons as to be claimed by them as family--sang of "Camp Number Three" instead of "the top of the world" on his "Some Summer Day" record for Paramount. "Things 'Bout Comin' My Way" was another set of lyrics, sung by Tampa Red and also by Walter Vinson. Rock fans may know the re-use of the melody through Robert Johnson's "Come On In My Kitchen" (recorded for the American Record Company labels in 1936), whether by other bluesmen (including Johnson's contemporary Johnny Shines) or later rock musicians (such as Delaney and Bonnie and the Steve Miller Band). More recent treatments of the theme have been done by B.B. King, including "Darlin', You Know I Love You" (1982) and "Blues Man" (1998).

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.