

Central Prison String Bands & Musicians

Pursuing a mystery leads to a musical collection



N_2004_5_37. String band, North Carolina State Prison, Raleigh, ca. 1915.

Several years ago, while wandering the Raleigh Flea Market, I came across a gentleman selling an old photograph. It was a faded black & white of eight prison inmates holding musical instruments. They stood in front of brick wall. The ground below their feet was barren dirt. Their faces were expressionless. At the bottom of the print, a caption read “String Band N.C. State Prison”.

I spent several years tracking down information about this photograph. I discovered that it was just one of thirty photographs taken by the Prison in 1911, and printed as postcards that were sold in the prison store. Unfortunately, I never came across the names of these eight inmates. But I continued my research on central prison music, and most of what I found on the topic came out of the 1930s.

In the prison newspaper I began finding articles endorsing the musical talents of its inmates. One article described how inmate Paul Turner “made a hit” at the State Theatre in downtown Raleigh. Prior to entering prison, Turner had completed his musical education at both the New England Conservatory in Boston and the Liepsic Conservatory in Germany.

By 1929, a radio show had begun airing within the prison. The show was called “Behind these prison walls” and was made possible by a local radio station. Wednesday night’s show was led Paul Turner, who played piano with a small band accompaniment. On alternate Saturday evenings, the prison’s storekeeper, Bill Campbell hosted a string band show. The black vocal quartets performed every other Saturday. The production led by the prisoners alone lasted only ten years before another broadcasting station took over the programing.

This information sparked a huge question for me...did audio exist of this show? Or better yet did audio exist of the prison musicians? I frantically spent the next couple of days contacting everyone I had met along the way through my research. Unfortunately I was not finding much. But one day I got an email.

I had been sharing my research with Marshall Wyatt, of Old Hat Records. Marshall is well known in the Raleigh for his work in American vernacular music. He founded Old Hat Records, which reissues vintage American music, coupled with historical research. Marshall went back and cross-referenced an old blues book and emailed me this section:

“We found more songs in Atlanta, still more in Milledgeville, with Lead Belly again acting as first assistant, since Alan had fallen ill with influenza. Always the nimble fingering of his guitar and his singing helped to bring out the best talent among the convicts... North Carolina, and its penitentiary at Raleigh, held us for three days. We then moved on to Washington, arriving on Christmas Eve.”

At the sight of these words my jaw dropped. Marshall informed me that the Library of Congress has recorded in Raleigh's Central Prison. Somewhere existed audio of the prisoners. It wasn't the show but with the cross-reference to the great blues guitarist, Lead Belly, I knew I had stumbled across something big—real big. So I contacted the Library of Congress and provided them with my research. In turn, the Library of Congress sent me documentation and the recordings.

As it turns out the LOC had sent John Lomax on a tour recording the American south; Raleigh was the last stop on that tour. Lomax brought along with him his son, Alan, and the notable blues legend, "Lead Belly". Backstory: the Lomaxes discovered Lead Belly in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a year prior to coming to Raleigh. They saw the aid Lead Belly could offer in cajoling prisoners to play. They petitioned the governor for his release, and by August of 1934 Lead Belly began traveling with the Lomaxes.

I learned that the recordings at central prison were conducted one week before Christmas (Dec. 19 — Dec. 22). Alan Lomax—19 years old at the time—had contracted influenza prior to this visit. So on this occasion Lead Belly filled in for Alan, by helping John with the recording. Towards the end of the session Lead Belly played on several tracks.



Following the recording, the group packed their equipment and drove to Washington D.C. for Christmas Eve. In the years spent researching this visit, I have come across nothing further of their stay. Neither the State Archive nor the John Lomax collection has any additional information of this visit. It is as if they entered and exited Raleigh, having never leaving mark. Fortunately we have the music they recorded.

The Raleigh central prison recordings became part of the John A. Lomax Southern States Collection, 1933-1937. Though they are low-tech field recordings, it is not hard to hear the sense of accomplishment in the voices of the artists. 80 years later, I too felt a sense of accomplishment finding these recordings. I've enjoyed sharing this journey with those interested in hearing the music.

Footnotes & additional artifacts

Experts in the field to contact

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Source: News & Observer, April of 1940.

Interested in learning more about this image?

There is not an original photograph of this image in the North Carolina Archives—just a negative shot from the original. Notes attached to the negative are brief; giving the date of 1909 and labeling it as a postcard. In a 1911 biennial prison report, it is discovered that in fact thirty photographs were taken in and around the prison grounds and made into postcards. The postcards— sold in the prison's gift shop — generated revenue for improvements to the prison's chapel and library. The photographer, Mr. Willis James Wilson, was paid \$80 according to prison accounting ledgers. Fortunately, many of these postcards are viewable online, through the UNC Postcard Collection Database, but unfortunately there was nothing of significant value printed on the back of any of them. Perhaps someone will come forward and provide more information in the future.