

Viola Lee Blues

Cannon's Jug Stompers (1928)

G, G, G, G
C, C-, G, G-
D, D, G, G

Harmonica

The judge he pleaded, clerk he wrote it, clerk he wrote it down indeedy
The judge he pleaded, the clerk he wrote it down
If you miss jail sentence you must be Nashville bound

Harmonica and kazoo

Some got six months, some got one solid, some got one solid year indeed, Lord
Some got six months, some got one solid year
But me and my buddy both got lifetime here

Harmonica and kazoo

Fix my supper, Mama, let me go to, let me go to bed indeed, Lord
Fix my supper, let me go to bed
I been drinking white lightning, it's gone to my head

Harmonica and kazoo

I wrote a letter, I mailed it in the, I mailed it in the air indeedy
I wrote a letter, I mailed it in the air
You know by that I have a friend somewhere

Harmonica and kazoo

Some thoughts on Noah Lewis' song Viola Lee Blues

By Fritz Richmond

Here are some thoughts on Noah Lewis' song "Viola Lee Blues." Lewis recorded it with his band in September 1928. He also recorded it with Gus Cannon's band. It is one of the most beautiful of all the old jug band songs.

The judge he pleaded, clerk he wrote it
Clerk he wrote it down indeedy
The judge he pleaded, the clerk he wrote it down
If you miss jail sentence you must be Nashville bound

In an American court the judge does not plead, the lawyers plead, and the court reporter writes everything down in shorthand with a steno machine. (Shorthand is a method of writing English as fast as a person can speak. It can be done either with paper and pencil or a machine.) The clerk has other duties in the courtroom. "Indeedy" is a way of saying "indeed" with extra emphasis. At the end of a trial, if there is a jury, the jury will decide the guilt or innocence of the defendant. If there is no jury, the judge decides. The defendant, if found guilty, will then be sentenced by the judge. Depending on the type of case, the judge can issue a decree, an opinion, an order, or a ruling. In the verse here, maybe what Gus meant was: "The judge decreed it." It sounds very similar to "The judge he pleaded" and makes better sense. The last line, about going to Nashville, is the key to a sad episode in American justice. Black men arrested in the southern U.S. were sometimes not sentenced to jail for crimes, but were sent to places where they had to work very hard, such as turpentine camps and sugar cane farms. Turpentine is a solvent refined from pine trees. The workers were virtual slaves. It was a very bad thing to get sent there. The men were sent to Nashville to be taken to the work camps. I don't think this happens any more.

Some got six months, some got one solid
Some got one solid year indeed, Lord
Some got six months, some got one solid year
But me and my buddy both got lifetime here

Here, Lewis is comparing the length of prison sentences. To say "one solid year" sounds like a longer time than "a year." He's bragging that he and his friend are such bad men that they'll be in prison for the rest of their lives, which is impressive, but not true. These guys were not criminals.

Fix my supper, Mama, let me go to
Let me go to bed indeed, Lord
Fix my supper, let me go to bed
I been drinking white lightning, it's gone to my head

Here, the song is no longer a prison blues; the singer is lamenting that he's gotten drunk. White lightning is any sort of illegal liquor, especially corn whiskey. Manufacture of alcohol was illegal when this song was written, but every big city had its secret breweries and distilleries. However, the quality varied widely, as did the alcohol content of any white lightning one might find for sale. When alcohol again became legal in 1933, most of the country rejoiced, but several factors kept some areas dry; that is, without legal alcohol. The constitutional amendment repealing prohibition gave the states complete power to regulate the manufacture, distribution, and sale of liquor. At the same time there was a nation-wide religious revival, spread by radio broadcasts and traveling tent shows, which was particularly popular in the South. These religious zealots and their followers were very critical of what they called "the evils of alcohol." This continuing climate of anti-alcohol was very favorable to the local bootleggers (sellers of illegal liquor) and moonshiners (operators of illegal distilleries) who were doing good business in the Great Depression and had money to influence local elections about liquor laws. They wanted to continue operating and did so. When I lived in Alabama in 1959, I was in a dry county. In order to get any booze, I had either to drive to the nearest wet county or buy moonshine or smuggled liquor.

I wrote a letter, I mailed it in the
I mailed it in the air indeedy
I wrote a letter, I mailed it in the air
You know by that I have a friend somewhere

This is the most beautiful verse of the song. It is only on Noah Lewis' version. How simple, how poignant it is. We know he has a friend, a very special friend, somewhere far away. Airmail was a new thing in 1928; it had only been available for a year or so before the song was recorded, and it was a big deal. It cost over ten times as much to send a letter by air than it cost to send it by regular mail. We also know from this verse that the man can write a letter. Not all blacks in the U.S. got much schooling in those days. He's bragging again. He says: not only can I compose a letter, but I can spare the money that would buy lunch and dinner just to send it by airmail, and I know someone in a distant city who'll be glad to hear from me.