

Tukufu: Our next story takes us on a hunt for some of the most sought-after blues recordings from the 1920s and '30s. 1917, a Midwestern chair-manufacturing company expands into the record business and takes a daring leap into a new market: records by black performers for black audiences. Over the next decade, Paramount Records discovers and records some of the most influential figures in the history of American music, including Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ma Rainey, Son House and Charlie Patton. But, in 1932, Paramount Records goes belly-up, a casualty of the great depression. For generations, the whereabouts of many of the original blues and jazz recordings from their Grafton, Wisconsin, recording studio have tantalized music historians. Nearly 75 years after Paramount's demise, a man from the neighboring town of Port Washington has got his hands on some old master recordings.

Dennis Klopp: They were the first masters I've seen in 30 years of looking for Paramount material. I know that there were records and masters in the plant when it closed down, but it all seemed to just vanish. [Blues music plays]

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I'm on my way to meet Dennis Klopp. Blues is a passion of mine, and the artists who recorded on the Paramount label are some of the all-time greats. How you doing?

Dennis: Hi.

Tukufu: So what do you have here?

Dennis: I have a couple of records and two metal masters which I know nothing about.

Tukufu: Where did you get these records from?

Dennis: The metal masters, I found at a yard sale in Grafton.

Tukufu: What can you tell me about these masters that might help me in my investigation?

Dennis: I've never played them. The gentleman at the yard sale didn't know -- he just mentioned that his uncle worked at the record plant and brought those home. I'd like to know what -- what kind of music is on those masters, I'd like them to be unreleased, unknown blues masterpieces. [Chuckles]

Tukufu: And Dennis has another question, one that has haunted music historians for over 70 years: What became of the remaining inventory when Paramount closed its doors?

Dennis: There's more metal masters than just two; there had to be thousands of records. What happened to everything?

Tukufu: Well, I'm going to take these masters and go see what they have to tell me.

Dennis: Good luck.

Tukufu: Dennis wants to know what's on his masters, but I'm also curious how a furniture factory in a rural, mostly white community in Wisconsin wound up as a pioneer in the blues record business. The invention of the phonograph in the early 1900s fostered a music industry explosion following World War I. With economic prosperity and the advent of factory mass production, records by popular entertainers could now be listened to at home, and a national dance craze sent record sales soaring to 200 million by 1919. The Wisconsin Chair Company in Port Washington saw the potential of the music business; shifting from furniture into

production of phonograph players and then pressing records. In 1917, they launched a label of their own, Paramount Records. Their early releases of regional orchestras and military bands fared poorly. [Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" plays] but in 1920, competitor Okeh Records' hit recording of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" shook up the industry and created a new market for what became known as "race music." This market, which was targeted at African-Americans, gave blues a new life; a new era was born, a new kind of music simply took off. In 1921, Paramount also had a race hit with Alberta Hunter's "Downhearted Blues." By 1929, blues and jazz recordings had become a mainstay of Paramount's business at their new Grafton, Wisconsin, recording studio. Paramount artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Son House, and Charlie Patton are today seen as founding fathers of rock 'n' roll, influencing artists from the Beatles to the White Stripes and Bob Dylan. But Paramount struggled to stay afloat during the depression. Instead, audiences turned to radio for musical entertainment. By 1932, Paramount record sales had dwindled to almost nothing. The Grafton plant was shut down. Paramount Record Company claims they had about 3 million records in stock. Now, most of these went to wholesale agencies, but what happened to the rest of them? Now, there's anecdotal information which suggests the factory burned them for fuel and that individuals took the records to patch up holes in walls, and that masters were sold as scrap metal. This is the first time I've ever seen record masters before, so I don't know much about them, but I can tell you this: they're made of metal, they feel a little rougher than your regular record; all that I can see that's printed on here is a number, and it looks like that number is in reverse. Maybe that's some identifying characteristic which will allow us to get more information about these masters. I'm bringing Dennis' masters to Jon Samuels, a recording engineer in New York City who specializes in remastering old audio recordings. So what can you tell me about these masters?

Jon Samuels: These are what are called "stampers." Now, a stamper is a reverse of a record.

Tukufu: Why would it be a reverse?

Jon: If you wanted to make what we call a "positive," you need a negative to make it. When they recorded it at the session, they recorded directly to a wax tablet. Then they would plate the wax tablet, creating what we call a master. They then make a record, made out of metal, called it a "mother" or a "mold." From there, they made yet one more metal, called a stamper, and, again, the reason you'd do this is so you could press many copies of the records.

Tukufu: So can we listen to what's on the recording?

Jon: We ought to be able to. Why don't we try?

Tukufu: Since a master is the mirror image of a record, Jon's turntable is equipped with a special forked needle, able to decipher raised ridges instead of grooves. [Record playing backwards] That sounds backwards.

Jon: Yeah, well, remember, I told you the record was backwards.

Tukufu: Fortunately, we're pretty lucky because we have computers today that can easily reverse it. It's just a file after all.

Jon: Okay, you ready to hear it play?

Tukufu: I am ready to hear it.

"It's three o'clock in the morning..."

Jon: I've listened to a lot of the blues, and this is definitely not the blues. This is not a blues record.

Tukufu: What about the other one?

Jon: All right, let's listen to the other one. [Banjo music playing ] And this is definitely not the blues.

Tukufu: No, this one isn't either.

Jon: I'm afraid neither of the metal parts you brought me have blues on them.

Tukufu: But Jon helped decipher a clue on the masters.

Jon: These are what are called "matrix numbers," And matrix numbers are an indicator to the original recording company what the recording was.

Tukufu: He tracked down the Paramount matrix numbers. The banjo song was a Dixie medley. It's played by a very famous banjo player of the time named Van Eps. And the other one was an English home-music song called "It's three o'clock in the morning," and it was sung by a man named Charles Harrison. And both of these recordings were made in the early 1920s. Paramount had an extensive repertoire of instrumentalists and crooners, and that's what's on Dennis' masters. But what happened to all the master recordings of those legendary blues musicians? And I'm still not clear how Paramount attracted so many artists from the Mississippi Delta to Grafton, Wisconsin. Music historian Dick Spottswood says the secret to Paramount's success with the blues was simple: geography.

Dick Spottswood: Paramount was located here in the Midwest, and it had its representatives and studios in -- after 1923 -- in Chicago. Although Grafton was a mostly white community, it was only 100 miles from Chicago, a city that, by the early 20th century, had become a powerful magnet for Delta blacks. Tens of thousands were making their way north to the windy city, looking for jobs but hungry for the music of the South. And so when these great performers all hit town, Paramount was there; they were able and willing to record them. Recording blues divas like Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Alberta Hunter was a stroke of genius; Paramount turned the ethnic and racial bias of the record industry in their favor. Before the 1920s, the record industry had very little to do with the music of America's minorities. The hillbillies in the South were not represented at all, American blacks in the South were represented by minstrel stereotypes. Labels like Okeh and Paramount made money from the growing economic clout of the black working class and opened a window on the richness of African-American oral traditions. And so tragedies that you could see as belonging to people of an entire class, of an entire society, were expressed as individual grievances, and that's what the blues is about. When Mamie Smith recorded her "Crazy Blues," becoming the first black woman to sing the blues, all of a sudden, the world was becoming a slightly different place. In a 1965 interview, the legendary bluesman Son House recalled recording in Grafton.

Tukufu: Dick doesn't know what happened to the missing Paramount blues archive, but says some of these recordings continue to be unearthed by collectors.

Dick: A rare Son House disk with two unheard songs recently resurfaced. We had never heard those performances before, and now, thanks to the survival of one single copy, we have two more really great performances by Son House from 1930. [Son House's "Mississippi County Farm Blues" playing]

Tukufu: I'm meeting Janet Erickson at the site of the former recording studio. She was there when the plant

closed and may be able to tell me about the missing records. Now, your father worked at this company, is that right? What exactly did he do for the company?

Janet Erickson: Well, dad was chief recording engineer, he dealt with the artists pretty much, and he was the pressing-plant foreman.

Tukufu: Did he ever bring his work home?

Janet: He brought records home, and he would take them upstairs and play them on the Victrola, and I would be with him, and I would wind up the Victrola, and he would play these records. Then he would take them, and he would write all sorts of things on them and take them back the next day.

Tukufu: Now, do you remember having any interactions with the artists?

Janet: An older lady came walking out of the studio, and Dad said it was Ma Rainey, and she came out, and Dad put me on her lap.

Tukufu: Now, do you remember how the people of Grafton responded to these African-Americans coming to this segregated town?

Janet: I believe they really didn't know how to react to the black artists. They've never seen them before, and it was something new. They were treated well in the plant itself, but they were hushed in and hushed out most of the time.

Tukufu: Talk to me about your recollections of what happened when Paramount Record Company closed.

Janet: I remember looking out of the window and then going outside and seeing the trucks there, lots of trucks. My dad was very saddened by the whole affair because music was kind of his life.

Tukufu: But your father was losing his job...

Janet: He was losing his job, yes. And this was the depression. It was the depression, the middle of the depression, and Dad was very, very upset.

Tukufu: Now, do you know what they did with the records and the masters when the plant closed? What Janet told me next was a key piece of information for my investigation. I'm bringing Dennis to the former site of the Paramount factory to tell him what I've discovered. Your masters were not the blues. What you have is a pop crooner singing some lovely ballads and a banjo player doing a Dixie melody.

Dennis: Well, it's nice to know what they are. They're still kind of cool, and they're still a big part of history because they are masters from that period, they were made at Paramount Record Company. What happened when the company closed down?

Tukufu: This is when the answer to your story gets really interesting. Now, do you know what they did with the records and the masters when the plant closed? Some of them were sailed into the river by disgruntled employees, and they were very -- very, very upset because they lost their jobs.

Dennis: They tossed them in the river? They were dumped? So it's possible some of those missing paramount records are gathering silt at the bottom of the Milwaukee River.

Tukufu: Rich Henry and his deep blue scuba-diving team have volunteered to help us get to the bottom of the mystery. Let's come over here, and I want to show you something. So if you look right over here, we have some scuba divers, and they're going to dive down to the deepest part of the river to see if they can find any remnants of the Paramount Record Company on the bottom of the river.

Dennis: That's wild. [Willie Brown's "Future Blues" plays]

Tukufu: After hours combing the river bottom, the divers were unable to rescue any Paramount recordings from their watery grave in the Milwaukee River. We discover that in the winter of 2000, a dam adjacent to the old chair factory had been removed. Our dive team believes the excavation had disturbed the riverbed. Any records dumped here 70 years ago may have been washed away. Blues fans will just have to keep scouring yard sales and flea markets in hope of discovering those long-lost musical treasures.

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