



Dockery Farms and the Birth of the Blues



Dockery Farms began as a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta. Although cotton was king in the post-Civil War South, it has been the music from the fields and cabins of Dockery Farms that make it famous as a birthplace of the blues. From its beginnings in the late 19th century through the rise of such unforgettable Delta bluesmen as Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Son House, and Howlin' Wolf, to the many legendary blues musicians today, Dockery Farms has provided fertile ground for the blues. The vivid poetry, powerful songs, and intense performing styles of the blues have touched people of all ages around the world. The music that was created, at least in part, by Dockery farm workers a century ago continues to influence popular culture to this day. It was a welcome diversion from their hard lives and a form of personal expression that spoke of woes and joys alike in a musical language all its own.

Will Dockery, the son of a Confederate general that died at the battle of Bull Run, founded the plantation. Young Will Dockery had graduated from the University of Mississippi and in 1885, with a gift of \$1,000 from his grandmother, purchased forest and swampland in the Mississippi Delta near the Yazoo and Sunflower Rivers. Recognizing the richness of the soil, he cleared the woods and drained the swamps opening the land for cotton. Word went out for workers and before long African-American families began to flock to Dockery Farms in search of work in the fields and, as tenant farmers (sharecroppers,) they cultivated cotton on the rich farmland.

Throughout the South, large landowners opened their fields to sharecroppers who would lease plots of land to tend themselves. In return they had to share part of their harvested crops as rent for the use of the land. Contracts for sharecroppers were often harsh and many lived on the verge of starvation. Will Dockery had earned a good reputation for treating his African-American workers and sharecroppers fairly and thus attracted ambitious workers from throughout the South.

The Dockery plantation by its peak in the mid 1930s consisted of 18,000 acres and extended over 28 square miles of rich fertile lowland along the Sunflower River. Will Dockery managed the land until the 1930s when his son, Joe Rice Dockery, took over and maintained the plantation through the Great Depression until his death in 1982. His widow, Keith Dockery McLean then ran the farm, which diversified to produce corn, rice and soybeans. In 1994, she turned the farm over to hired managers. It was Ms. McLean that realized that Dockery Farms was a hotbed of the blues and later in her life came to take pride in the farm's significance as a source of this music. Since her death in 2006, her daughters and grandchildren have owned Dockery and have established a foundation in hopes of funding research into its extensive historic archives of the Delta Blues.

In the early 20th century, Dockery Farms was nearly self-sufficient, more so than its neighboring plantations. It had its own currency and general store, a physician, a railroad depot, a dairy, a seed house, cotton gin, sawmill, and three churches. There was also a school for the 1,000 to 3,000 men, women, and children who worked during the farm's busiest times as either day laborers or as sharecroppers. Farm workers often sang while working the fields and their music became their basic entertainment. The music from the fields and cabins of the farms in the Mississippi Delta became famous as the blues.

African-American men, accompanying themselves on guitars, banjos, harmonicas, quills and jugs, would sing versions of popular songs and variations of "field hollers" as they planted, weeded, and picked cotton. The first reported sighting of the blues, however, was recorded in 1903 at the Tutwiler railroad depot near Dockery. Here, composer W. C. Handy noticed a "lean, loose-jointed Negro" playing a guitar and pressing the flat of a knife blade against the strings down its neck. The player created a "bluesy" effect while singing "going where the southern cross' the dog," a reference to a locally famous juncture of train lines.

In 1900, Bill and Annie Patton and their 12 children took up residence at Dockery Farms. Their nine-year-old, Charlie, took to following guitarist Henry Sloan to his performances at picnics, fish-fries, and social gatherings at boarding houses where the day laborers lived. By 1910, Patton was himself a professional musician, playing songs such as his own "Pony Blues," often with fellow guitarist Willie Brown. Within the next five years Patton had come to influence Tommy Johnson, considered one of the best ragtime-blues guitarists of the day, who had traveled to Dockery. He had also joined the Chatmon brothers who recorded using the name the "Mississippi Sheiks" at their musical jobs throughout the area.

Even though there were no juke joints on the farm, Charlie Patton and other bluesmen, drawn to Dockery by its fame, used the plantation as their base. They would travel the network of state roads around Dockery Farms to communities large enough to support audiences that loved the blues. One of these roads, Highway 61, from Memphis to Vicksburg, was immortalized by 1960s folk/rock icon Bob Dylan. This was "blues country." The plantation was located between the towns of Cleveland and Ruleville, just south of the state prison at Parchman and north of Indianola, the birthplace of the blues guitar great B.B. King. Shops in the area sold "race records." These were typically blues sung by women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and produced presumably for African-American buyers. In 1929 Charlie Patton recorded 14 songs for Paramount Records, featuring his gruff voice and rhythmic, percussive plucking. They immediately became top sellers, and resulted eventually in his second recording sessions, producing 26 titles, for the ARC company in New York in 1934.

But it was Patton's live performances that inspired and influenced fans such as Robert Johnson, Bukka White, Ed "Son" House, Chester Burnett (also known as "Howlin' Wolf), and Roebuck "Pop" Staples. These important artists in blues history either lived at or passed through Dockery Farms. Bluesmen Sonnyboy Williamson and Leadbelly were among "guests of the state" at nearby Parchman Prison during the same era. Besides his blues guitar playing and singing, Patton was well known for his stage moves.

He danced while playing and swinging his guitar around, often playing it behind his back. These crowd-pleasing antics imitated by rock stars including Jimi Hendrix have survived today in the acts of bluesmen such as Buddy Guy. Patton's uninhibited physical activity while performing must have been exciting to the farmers and other workers who observed him at close quarters. His growly vocals and his dancing beat surely energized his audiences.

Patton and the other bluesmen based around Dockery Farms in the 1920s could make about \$25 for a performance at a party. Although not much by current standards, this was about five or ten times what they earned picking crops in the field! In addition to the freedom from backbreaking work, the bluesmen won celebrity and the attention of women. They could travel from place to place and had leisure time to spend as they pleased. Like Patton, they may have all been avoiding the hard work in the fields, the so-called "honest day's labor," that was the source of Dockery Farms' agricultural success. But by playing their Delta blues they created an art form that gave comfort and support to countless numbers of contemporary listeners. The bluesmen of the Mississippi Delta produced invaluable musical dividends to everyone who has learned their stories and heard their enduring songs.

Questions to consider:

1. Why did Dockery Farms draw workers to the plantation?
2. What place did music have in the daily lives of workers in the cotton fields?
3. How much time did residents of Dockery Farms and nearby settlements have for listening to the blues?
4. What were the earlier sources of the songs Charlie Patton, the Mississippi Sheiks, and others performed in and around Dockery Farms?
5. How were the Delta bluesmen discovered beyond the areas they could reach from their home bases at or near Dockery Farms?
6. What role did "race records" play in popularizing the blues?
7. What does contemporary popular music owe to the blues?