

F L O O D E D W I T H T H E B L U E S

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“When it thunders and lightnin’ and the wind begins to blow, There’s thousands of people ain’t got no place to go.”

— lyrics from Bessie Smith’s ‘Back Water Blues’ song describing the 1927 flood of the Mississippi River

Shortly after one of the nation’s worst natural disasters struck the South, a record company executive invited musicians to tour the devastated area and write songs about the flood waters that had displaced thousands of poor black people. A cash prize was offered for the musician who came up with the “best” song.

A guitar player from Mississippi accepted the challenge, as did a woman from Tennessee who wrote lyrics about losing her home and having to be rescued by a passing boat. “When it thunders and lightnin’ and the wind begins to blow,” the woman sang, “There’s thousands of people ain’t got no place to go.”

That Mississippi guitar player — Big Bill Broonzy — would later gain fame in Chicago, but he lost the contest to Bessie Smith with her “Back Water Blues,” a song that described the heartache of living through the 1927 flood of the Mississippi River.

Although Randy Newman’s “Louisiana 1927” has become the de facto anthem of the bayou state since Hurricane Katrina, blues musicians in the 20th century wrote, sang and recorded songs that dealt with an array of topics, including the experience of living through a devastating flood.

Some of these blues lyrics tell of a situation eerily similar to the situation facing the displaced poor of

New Orleans today.

In 1929, husband-and-wife team Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie recorded a song they had written about the 1927 flood. More than 40 years later, the British rock group Led Zeppelin recorded their own version of “When the Levee Breaks,” which, in the original version, included the following lyrics:

They sent out alarm for everybody to leave town (twice)

But when I got the news I was high-water bound.

The flooding along the Mississippi River in 1927, which sent 27,000 square miles underwater and killed hundreds in a seven-state region, became the subject of dozens of blues songs. Musicians now regarded as blues legends — Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Lonnie Johnson and Tommy Johnson — recorded flood songs.

Blues musicians also lamented in song about the questionable response to flood victims by the federal government and American Red Cross. Out of the 1927 flood came the song “Red Cross Blues,” recorded by Lead Belly and others, that tells about a man’s reluctance to rely on an organization that was forcing black refugees to work in the clean-up efforts.

Black Americans in the early and mid 20th century used the blues to give commentary, voice concerns and raise complaints, said Harriet Ottenheimer, a professor of anthropology at Kansas State University and an expert on blues music.

Ottenheimer has studied the blues since the early 1960s. She says blues

rhythms set a steady beat to dance to while blues lyrics provided a way to express common life experiences.

“The blues was a poetic form,” she says. “It was the poetry of the day, and the music was used to encapsulate the experiences that people were having.”

Not all bluesmen and women experienced the floods firsthand, although the songs were written in the first person as if the singer had. (Randy Newman never saw the “six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline” that he sings about either.) Ottenheimer says blues singers then, just as now, tend to know their audience, and the singers work with them to share in a common experience. Using a first person narrative helps to form a bond between the singer and the rural sharecropper wiped out by heavy rain, winds and levee breaks.

“The singers personalize the lyrics and make it seem as if they had the experience even if they didn’t,” she says.

Singers such as Bessie Smith were able to come up with poignant songs about having to live through crisis, and Ottenheimer says the lyrics and music of “Back Water Blues” and other blues songs “really hit you with the feelings of those who have been devastated by a flood.”

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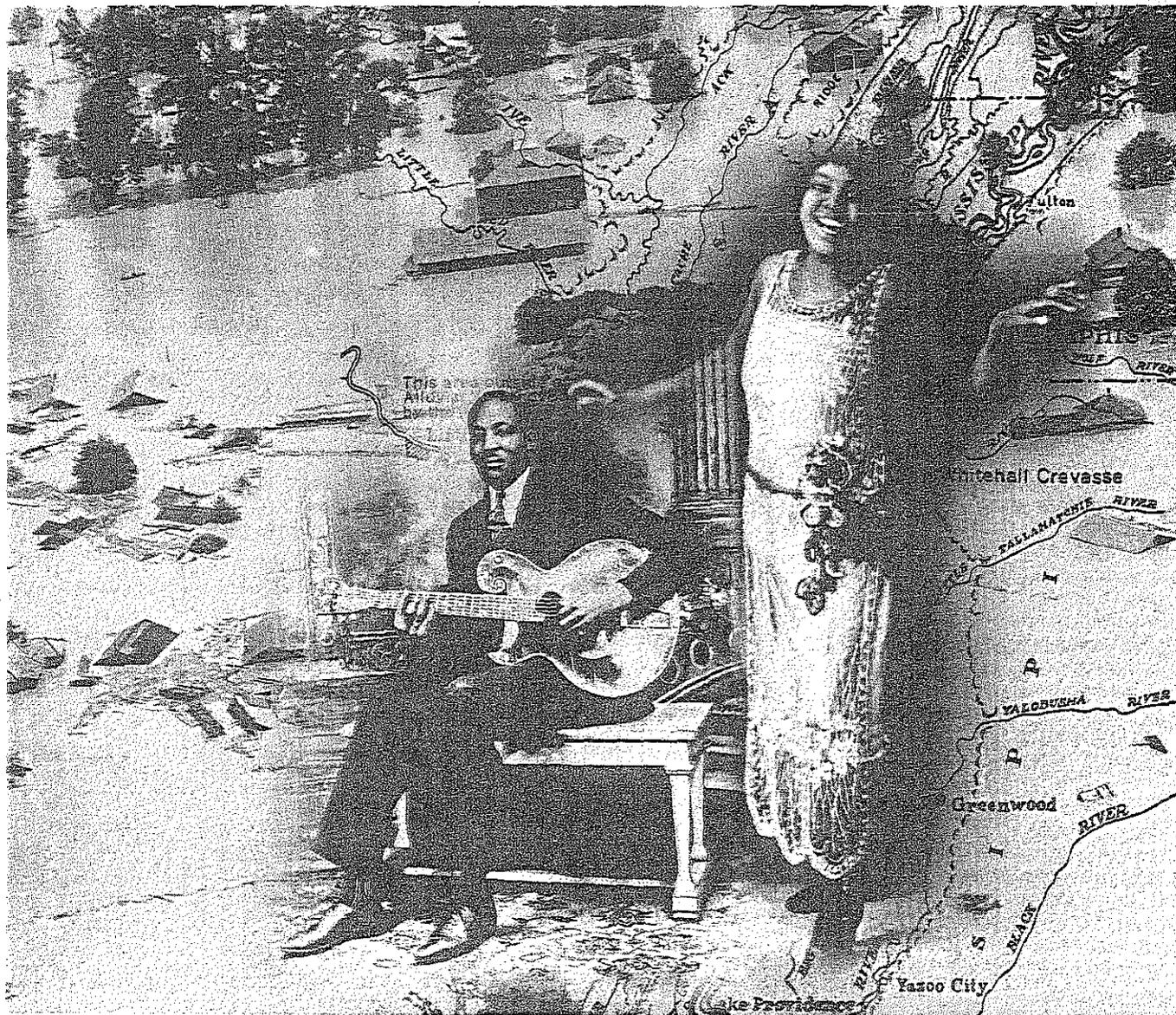
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Arkansas City, Ark., during the 1927 flood; Big Bill Broonzy and Bessie Smith wrote songs about the 1927 flood of the Mississippi River.