True Blues: Behind Bars

By Kerry Kudlacek

One of the oldest "true blues" is Joe Turner Blues: It is rarely recorded and rarely heard. The only version I have is on a long-outof-print 3 LP set on Verve, cut by Big Bill Broonzy in 1957, one year before he died. When Pete Turney was governor of Tennessee (1892 – 1896), he appointed his brother Joe Turney (which oral folk tradition evolved into Turner) to transport prisoners from Memphis to the state penitentiary in Nashville. Broonzy's version of the song begins: They say Joe Turner's come and gone (2x), you know he had that long chain on. Obviously the long chain man was not a welcome sight to convicts and other evil-doers. In 1914 W.C. Handy, that great discoverer, arranger and copyrighter of blues, heard this folk blues and copyrighted it under his own name. Handy, himself, cut the song for a Library of Congress project in 1938, accompanying himself on guitar. Folklorist John Lomax captured two more versions in 1942 including one by Muddy Waters. Another hated and feared "long chain man" was Bud Russell. Standing six foot two and weighing over 200 pounds, he terrorized convicts in the Texas prison system from the 1920s through the 1930s, transporting them to Sugarland Prison Farm south of Houston. Leadbelly mentions Russell in Midnight Special and Lightning Hopkins sings about him in Penitentiary Blues. Hopkins sings, Bud Russell drove women like he did the men. Hopkins did time on a Texas chain gang in the mid 30s and may have had personal contact with Russell. Midnight Special is perhaps the most well-known true blues. Many people know that Leadbelly sang his way out of Angola Prison in Louisiana in 1934, but the 12-string player was also transported to Sugarland Prison Farm (by Bud Russell) in 1918 due to a conviction for attempted murder. When Gov. Pat Neff came to Sugarland in 1924, Leadbelly composed a song for him and sang his way out of that prison also. During his stay at Sugarland, Leadbelly learned that every night a train left Houston for San Antonio at eleven and passed by Sugarland at midnight. The train represented escape, freedom and fantasy, and the inmates called it the Midnight Special. As verses about the train began to circulate in the prison, Leadbelly added verses and put the song in the form we know today. John Lomax collected Leadbelly's version at Angola in 1933. He also collected versions in other Texas prisons in 1934, 1936 and 1937. In 1940 Leadbelly taught the song to Pete

Seeger, who formed a massively influential folk group, the Weavers, in 1949. In 1950 the Weavers' record of Leadbelly's Goodnight Irene was number one on the hit parade, and in 1952 their version of Midnight Special reached #30 on the charts. Josh White had been singing the song since 1950, and when the Kingston Trio cut it, this true blues train song became familiar to most Americans. The song's ascendency to fame became complete in 1973 when NBC-TV began a 90-minute show called Midnight Specials announced by Wolfman Jack and featuring various rock and folk groups of the day. And in the Central Time Zone, the show aired at midnight.