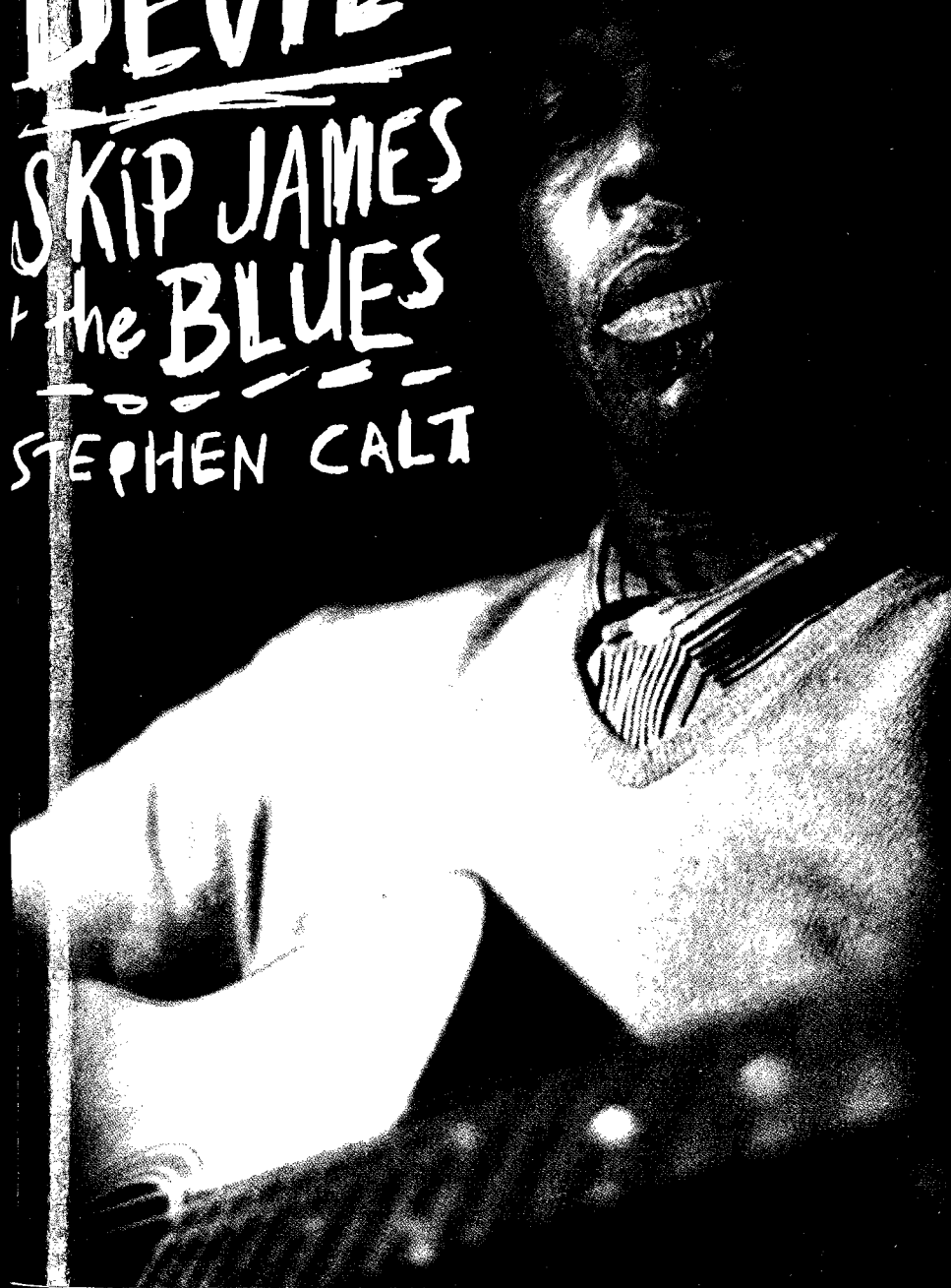


I'd Rather  
be the  
**DEVIL**

SKIP JAMES  
& the **BLUES**

STEPHEN CALT



## 1. *The Blues Singer*

In the winter of 1931, a blues singer boarded a segregated Illinois Central passenger train in Jackson, Mississippi. He was a small, dark, figure with a laborer's brawny build and a face that was memorable chiefly for its blue eyes. He carried no luggage, except for a sixty-five dollar guitar that had recently been given to him by a local record store owner. In his pockets were thirteen dollars, expense money the same man had given him.

He had no idea how much he would be paid for the records he was scheduled to make, or how many songs he would be allowed to record. Almost nothing concerning the session had been explained to him by his sponsor, who had given him his train ticket.

The man had been north of Memphis only once, two years before, and he was surprised to see a well-dressed, light-complexioned black woman board the train at Springfield, Illinois with a white man, evidently her lover. He had never seen a mixed couple. In his native Mississippi, a black man could not glance at a white woman without risking the wrath of Southern whites; if a white man consorted with a black woman, he did so surreptitiously.

Noticing his guitar, the man asked him if he could play *Am I Blue?*, a popular tune Ethel Waters had introduced a year and a half earlier in a movie musical.

"I think so," Skippy James replied. After singing a verse, he completed the song with kazoo accompaniment. Enraptured by his performance, the couple engaged him in conversation. When James explained that he was headed north to record for the Para-

mount label, the woman asked what songs he intended to record. She wrote down his address, and promised to buy his records.

A few moments after they concluded their conversation, the woman tapped him on the shoulder and handed him fifty cents. Silently, he snickered. Her lover was a wealthy Jew, he thought; he could have afforded a dollar tip.

At six o'clock the next morning the train pulled into Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In the station, James was startled to find himself hailed by a white stranger dressed in a business suit. As the man introduced himself as Art Laibly, the recording manager of Paramount, James wondered how Laibly had been able to recognize him. Together they rode an electric train to Grafton, a small town twenty miles north of Milwaukee. Laibly escorted him to a local hotel, where he was to rest before the session began that afternoon. Before leaving James, Laibly asked him how many records he could make. "As many as you want," James replied.

Soon James fell asleep. At eleven a bellhop woke him and took him to a cafe, where Laibly bought his lunch. As James ate, the 37-year old recording director explained the financial details of the recording session, offering him a choice between a deferred sales royalty and a flat fee for making records over the next two years. Believing that his records would sell abundantly, James decided to accept the deferred payment arrangement.

At one o'clock, he was taken to a nearby recording studio located on the second floor of a deserted factory. The room was empty except for an engineer and a tall, attractive black woman who evidently worked as Laibly's assistant.

A glance at the company's equipment satisfied him that it was "number one stuff."

Laibly asked him if he preferred to begin recording on guitar or piano. James replied laconically that it made no difference to him. Laibly suggested that he begin his session on a company guitar, which could accommodate twelve strings. As James tuned the instrument he marveled that it could hold a tone "just like a piano." In his mind, it was worth \$350, far more than the five or ten-dollar instruments he was accustomed to owning.

After explaining recording procedures, Laibly gave him two mint tablets and a glass of whiskey, expedients the singer used to "scrape out" his throat. At Laibly's request, he began playing the first song of his session, *Devil Got My Woman*. After he finished a couple of verses he was beckoned to the control booth by an engineer who asked if he had ever heard his voice on record. The song fragment, which had been recorded to test volume levels, was played back to him for his reaction.

Then the session began. At the onset of a flashing green light James would begin playing a song of his own choosing. He was to continue until he saw a red light, which meant that he was to complete the song after finishing the verse he was singing. When a song was finished, Laibly would ask him for its title. In some instances, he would be asked to repeat a song.

One of James' songs, a dirge-like, minor key lament, appeared to impress Laibly:

Hard times here an' everywhere you go  
Times is harder than ever been before.

An' the people are driftin' from door to door  
Can't find no heaven, I don't care where they go.

Laibly expressed surprise that James had observed the effects of the Depression.

By the late afternoon James had recorded over a dozen tunes, most of them blues. On the following morning, he returned to the studio and recorded a succession of piano songs. For these tunes, Laibly placed a board beneath his feet to enhance the sound of his foot-stomping. When Laibly asked if he could compose or rearrange a song about a gun, James thought for a few minutes and reeled off an impromptu tune:

If I send for my baby, and she don't come  
All the doctors in Wisconsin, sure won't help her none.

And if she gets unruly, and gets so she won't "do"  
I'll take my 22-20, I'll cut her half in two.

As he repeated the second verse, he pummeled the board beneath him with his shoe, as if to demonstrate the violence he intended to wreak upon the imaginary girlfriend.

After he had completed four piano songs, Laibly informed him that he had recorded more tunes than any previous Paramount artist. He spoke of holding another session later that year.

James left Grafton that afternoon with eight dollars in expense money given by Laibly, and a promise of receiving payment by mail when his records were issued.

He anticipated attaining immense fame from his records. In the meantime, however, he would resume the footloose life style one of his songs had commemorated:

You wake up, set out on a long ol' lonesome road  
"I got to leave from here, catch the first freight train  
that blow."

*(Hard-Luck Child)*

"I never was in anything too long or deep: that's why I reckon they called me 'Skip,'" he once remarked.

His immediate plans were no more exalted than an appearance at a weekend house party in Jackson. As the weekend was a few days away, he decided to get off when his train stopped in Memphis. He made his way to a barrelhouse on North Nichols Street, in the city's black red-light district. As always, he counted on ready money by introducing himself to the owner as a musician and playing an audition tune.

In the middle of his performance a brawl erupted. At the sound of gunfire, he stopped playing, and walked out.