

Tilo Hähnel, *a Brief Portrait of: Charley Patton*, May 30, 2012  
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«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»  
Research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) PF 669/4-1.

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*«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»\**

*a Brief Portrait of:*

# CHARLEY PATTON

*Tilo Hähnel*

## **Abstract**

Charley Patton, the «Father of the Delta Blues» exemplifies many characteristics of the Delta Blues: a rough and raspy voice, a relaxed articulation, and a minimalistic approach to musical form such as melody and harmony. In his blues singing he avoided singing the third and seventh tone at a discrete pitch; he rather applied a permanent glissando approximately a semitone around the equal tempered pitch or around the «neutral third». Born in the late Nineteenth Century, Patton belongs to the first generation of blues performers, which already had performed years—if not even decades—before they were discovered by the record industry. In this regard, Patton is also an example of an African-American musician who played almost everything the audience liked and therefore was not restricted to blues. Patton is outstanding in so far as even in his recordings he was not restricted to blues.

## **1 BIOGRAPHY**

Charley Patton was probably born in 1887. He always lived at Dockery Farms in the Mississippi Delta and hardly left it.<sup>1</sup> There is not much known about Patton. Probably this is simply why there is not much to tell about Patton: He was an entertaining musician who was known in the Delta, but never toured through Europe or even the USA. He played a lot in the Delta and was a part of the local blues scene. Dockery Farms were the home of many musicians such as Willie Brown, Tommy

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<sup>1</sup>See Titon (1994), p. 15.

Johnson and his brother LeDell, Roebuck Staples (of the «Staple Singers», a gospel family), Howlin' Wolf (his real name was Chester Burnett) and others. According to Fahey (1970), Patton taught Howlin' Wolf playing guitar. Wolf tries to imitate Patton's singing style, but unsuccessfully.

Patton was «discovered» by Henry C. Speir, a talent scout travelling to find downhome blues talents (Titon 1994). As Fahey (1970) describes, Patton made 52 recordings between 1929 and 1934, but he was an active performer between 1915 and 1934.

... [Speir] placed no weight on the prospective singer's popularity in his community. He observed that singers who were effective in person could lose their effectiveness on record. Perhaps he was thinking of Patton, whose clowning and antics could not be transferred to disc, although enough people were satisfied with the music to make his records sell moderately well.<sup>2</sup>

Patton, on the other hand,

... brought Willie Brown and Son House to Speir's attention, and Speir soon arranged recording sessions for them.

The talent scout had to show the potentially successful blues singer some respect. Often he had to convince a reluctant plantation landlord to allow the singer to travel hundreds of miles to make a record, with no other guarantee than his word that he would return. W. R. Calaway of the American Record Corporation had to bail Charley Patton out of jail for his 1934 session.<sup>3</sup>

Patton formed the «Drew group» with Bankston and Tommy Johnson. The group and Patton himself played at «Saturday night dances», which, according to Titon (1994), were as important as the Sunday service but with contrary moral orientation.

His early death may be related to a heart ailment Patton was suffering from since 1933.

He was chronically out of breath and it would take him two or three days to recuperate from a night's singing.<sup>4</sup>

His wife Bertha Lee reported that they had a fight in 1930, in which she cut Patton's throat with a butcher's knife. Whether it was because of the knife or the heart ailment, Patton's voice became weak and even more jittery than it already had been before. There are no reports about alcohol misuse, but when listening closely to the recordings, one can assume that Patton was even drunk when he recorded.

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<sup>2</sup>Titon (1994), p. 213.

<sup>3</sup>Titon (1994), p. 213, referring to Fahey (1970), probably p. 25..

<sup>4</sup>Fahey (1970), p. 25.

## 2 MICROPHONE VOICE

The general success of rough voices, which showed regional accents (like the voice of Patton), was due to the microphone recording technique, for the new invention made the recording of a larger frequency range possible. Further, the recording equipment was lighter and therefore more portable (Evans 2002).

[...] According to Son House, Paramount used two microphones, one for voice and one for instrument. Skip James said the same thing except that when he played the piano, the recording engineer also put a microphone on his feet.  
5

Patton can barely be understood. This unclear articulation is not solely based on a regional accent. When

... I [Titon] asked Son House to listen to a particular line from a song by Charley Patton that I could not make out, House laughed. He said, «You could sit at Charley's feet and not understand a word he sang»<sup>6</sup>

This is an important fact, which seems to question Patton's importance as a local travelling musician who played at larger parties. If nobody understood what he was singing about even when recorded with a microphone next to his mouth, it can be questioned whether his voice and singing was important at all. It may likely be that (a) the songs Patton sung were known and played by other musicians too, (b) the text Patton sung was not important as the way he did it (Titon showed clearly that many of the early blues musicians did not record the same song twice simple because they could not remember what they were singing a few minutes ago), and (c) his clowning and guitar playing technique were most responsible for Patton's local fame.

## 3 BLUE NOTE INTONATION

There are many discussions about «the blue note», questioning the exact pitch of certain tones (the tones placed at the third and seventh position of the diatonic scale) or the way these notes are sung.

Charley Patton may not answer the way «the blue note» is sung, but he shows a distinct characteristic of «his blue note» when singing the blues.

Patton sings few neutral pitches other than in slurs, and when he does, they are probably «mistakes», that is, autologically occurring pitches (not a lead pitch or part of a slur) which he sounds unintentionally—pitches which he probably considered mistakes because he does not repeat them in the corresponding places in the other stanzas.[...] Neutral pitches, then as defined in this study, play virtually no part in Pattons singing.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Fahey (1970), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Titon (1994), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup>Fahey (1970), p. 34

Fahey (1970) suggests that Patton sings a slide rather than a pitch. However, there are instances of «neutral pitches», i.e., pitches exactly between the minor and major interval such as the third.

Titon (1994) assumes that blue notes are rather tones at three ranges of pitch, the «E complex», «G complex», and the «B complex». In these complexes, any pitch occurs more or less frequently, e.g., the «E complex» includes  $\downarrow Eb$ ,  $Eb$ ,  $\uparrow Eb$ ,  $\downarrow E$ ,  $E$ , and  $\uparrow E$ .

An interesting observation regarding the blue notes of Charley Patton is the following:

In fact, in some instances I have heard  $\downarrow E'$  (microtonally between  $\uparrow Eb'$  and  $E'$  here, though in some notations  $\downarrow E'$  might be the same as  $\uparrow Eb'$ ) when the singer was leaning slightly on  $E'$ . [...] But the most important argument that these quarter-tones from distinct pitches in a downhome blues mode is that singers enter and move within the complexes in a manner reasonably consistent from phrase to phrase, line to line, and stanza to stanza throughout a given song.<sup>8</sup>

This paragraph shows that without listening to the recording, the exact intonation and the changes a tone shows can hardly be put into words properly.

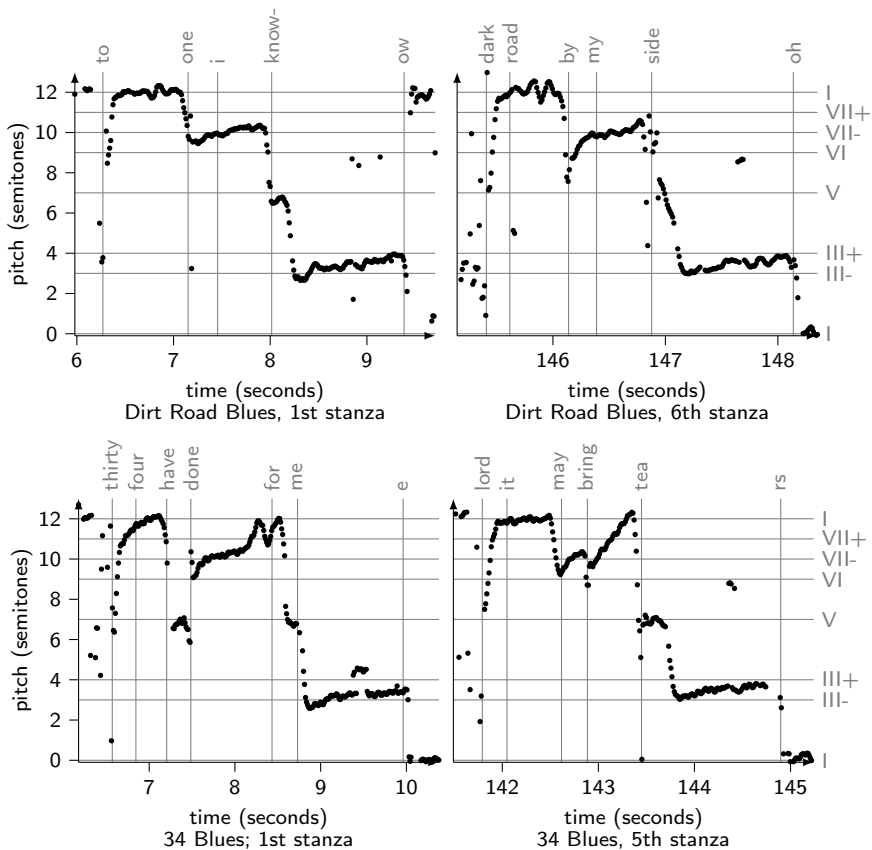
Figure 1 at page 5 shows the pitch curves of four different examples of Patton's «blue note» singing. In his «Dirt Road Blues», Patton glides from the minor to the major third. This glide lasts always longer than a whole second in time. The gliding at the seventh is rather a glide around the minor seventh. Patton recorded the «Dirt Road Blues» in his first session in 1929. The «34 Blues» he recorded in his last session in 1934, a few weeks before he died. Both songs match the usual downhome blues melody range of a tenth. Titon describes that a typical movement is an upward movement within the «E complex». This particularly holds for Charley Patton. When  $\uparrow E$  or  $E$  is reached, the melody often jumps downwards to  $C$ . Frequently, the lower region of the «E complex» is reached from  $G$ <sup>9</sup>.

#### 4 JITTER AND SUBHARMONICS

Charley Patton's voice is always raspy. It is characterised by two things: a constant jitter, i.e., a fast random-like change of pitch, and, when he raises his voice, by the emergence of subharmonics, i.e., additional frequencies between the harmonics of the fundamental frequency  $F_0$ . Figure 2 at page 7 shows the beginning of Patton's «Dirt Road Blues». Beside the constant jittering of his voice, the pitch is stable throughout the whole word «way». The Figure also shows the gliding of the seventh and third. Moreover, at the syllable «know» his voice becomes rougher and clearly shows one subharmonic between the harmonics of the basic pitch. Omori,

<sup>8</sup>See Titon (1994), p. 159.

<sup>9</sup>See Titon (1994), p. 158 et seq.



**Figure 1:** ► Charley Patton. Pitch curve showing the second half of the first line of four different stanzas from «Dirt Road Blues» and «34 Blues». Patton's «blue note» is a glide from the minor to the major third. This is constant throughout the entire stanzas in his «Dirt Road Blues». In «34 Blues» his noticeably weakened voice manages this intonation less exact, but the intonation is still very similar.

Kojima, Kakani, Slavid & Blaugrund (1997) showed that the appearance of subharmonics is responsible for the impression of raspiness—probably to a higher degree than the appearance of both jitter and shimmer—and, consequently, spectral analysis is an objective method to display and evaluate raspiness. Like other authors also do, they assume subharmonics being a kind of pathological abnormality. However, they found twenty out of 386 pathological voices that showed subharmonics—the others did not. There is also the possibility of a «non-pathological» rasp causing subharmonics in the spectrum. One possibility is a «healthy» amplitude modulation of the vocal folds, and another could be a tone made by the ventricular folds (the «false vocal folds» that are two folds superior to the vocal folds). Additional vibrations of the ventricular folds are closely related to throat singing and growls.

As Patton's voice became weaker throughout the years, he showed more intense subharmonics but also transient energy that neither allowed a clear pitch detection nor a detection of a vowel. Figure 3 at page 8 shows the last stanza of Patton's «34 Blues», recorded on his last session in 1934. One can clearly identify intense subharmonics and the transient energy noises in the high frequency range that do not allow any conclusion of a pitch or harmonic.

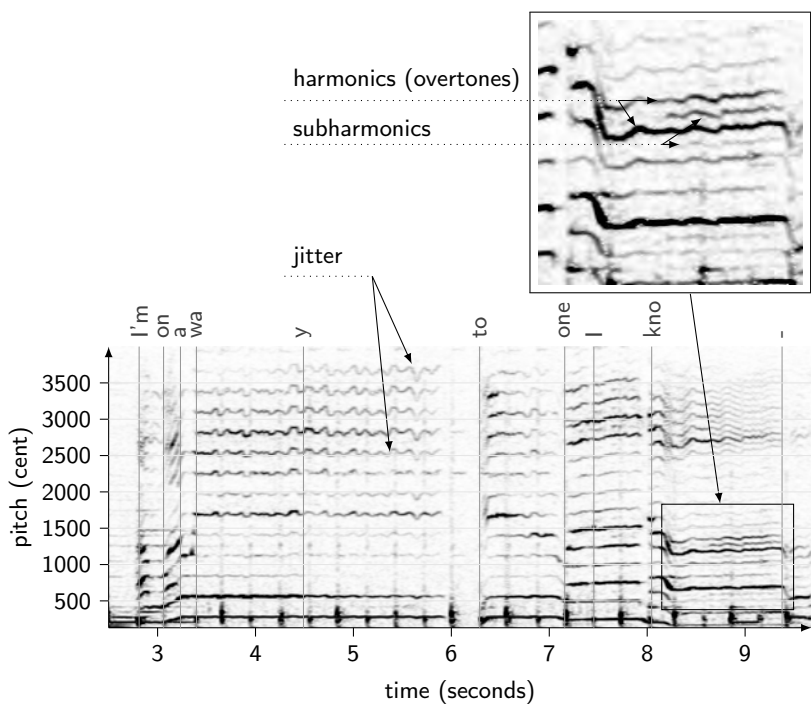
## **5 PATTON'S REPERTOIRE**

Many singers known as blues singers, when born before 1900, played a wide repertoire, including spirituals, folk songs, minstrels and ragtime songs. (Evans 2002). Patton recorded a wide repertoire, too, but barely changed the sound of his voice. Whether or not he sung a blues—no matter if it was a ragtime, a spiritual, a humorous and offensive dance song, or a ballad—he always showed his raspy voice, seldom exceeded a vocal range of a decime and nearly almost sang with the same intensity. The difference between blues and non-blues songs was that non-blues songs lacked the characteristic gliding between or around the third and seventh tone of the scale.

Patton's recordings include some songs titled «blues», which show no formal accordance with blues. For example, his «running wild blues» consists of a chain of a four-bar section that consist of a four chord cadence C-G-D-G.

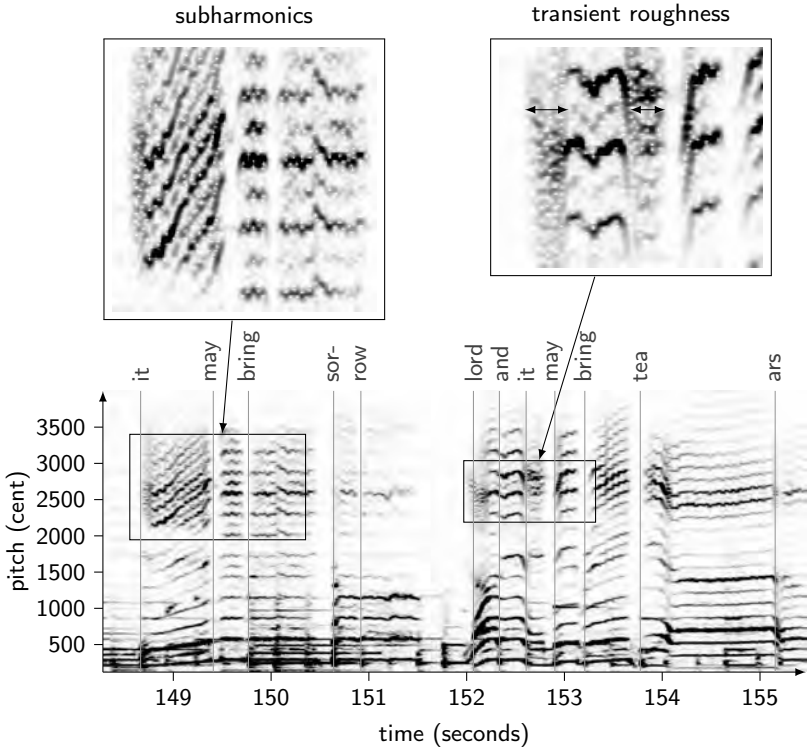
Patton variates the simple melodic motif of the second measure nearly each time it occurs. Figure 4 at page 9 lists all variations and shows the sequence of all variations in the piece. There is no musical reason why Patton should name this tune a blues. The lyrics are quite secular, dealing with a man who is running wild because his girlfriend is running wild together with another man. The double meaning of running wild and the wild tempo make it a rather funny song.

Songs like «Boweavil Blues» lack a blues cadence, too, but contain bluesy elements, such as a slide guitar that parallels the vocal gliding between the minor and major third. Additionally, the lyrics include a slightly depressive content. The «Boweavil Blues» is even more minimalistic than the «Running Wild Blues». The



**Figure 2:** ► Charley Patton. «Dirt Road Blues». First stanza. The spectrogram displays a distinct jitter and clear subharmonics with a frequency of  $F_0/2$  Hz.





**Figure 3:** ► Charley Patton. «34 Blues». Last stanza. The spectrogram shows an increase of jitter frequency as well as an increased raspiness that is not only caused by subharmonics (with a frequency of  $F_0/2$  hz) but also by a broadband energy rise.

No.	Measure			
	1	2	3	4
I	A	A	A	A
II	A	B	B	A
III	A	C	B	A
IV	A	D	B	A
V	A	E	A'	A
VI	A'	E	B	A
VII	A	F	C	A
VIII	A	G	B'	A
IX	A	H	A'	A
X	A	I	B	A
XI	A	B'	A	A
XII	A	J	B	A
XIII	A	K	B'	A
XIV	A	L	B	A
XV	A	M	C	A

Intro Cadence Var. M1 Variations measure 2 Var M3

**Figure 4:** Charley Patton. «Running Wild Blues». Melodic variations of the four-bar phrase prominently happen at the second bar («Takt 2»). The first line shows the intro. the second line includes the four-bar cadence that is repeated until the end of the tune. During the repetitions Patton one times varies the first measure (third line, «Takt 1»), ► 13 times the second measure (lines 4–7, «Takt 3») and two times the third measure («Takt 3»). The left table shows the order of the variations throughout the whole tune.

only thing that changes is the tempo that increases non-linearly from 85–120bpm.

Other songs are sexually offensive, like the fast ragtime song «Shake it and Brake it (but don't let it fall)» or they are the opposite, like the spiritual «Some day».

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