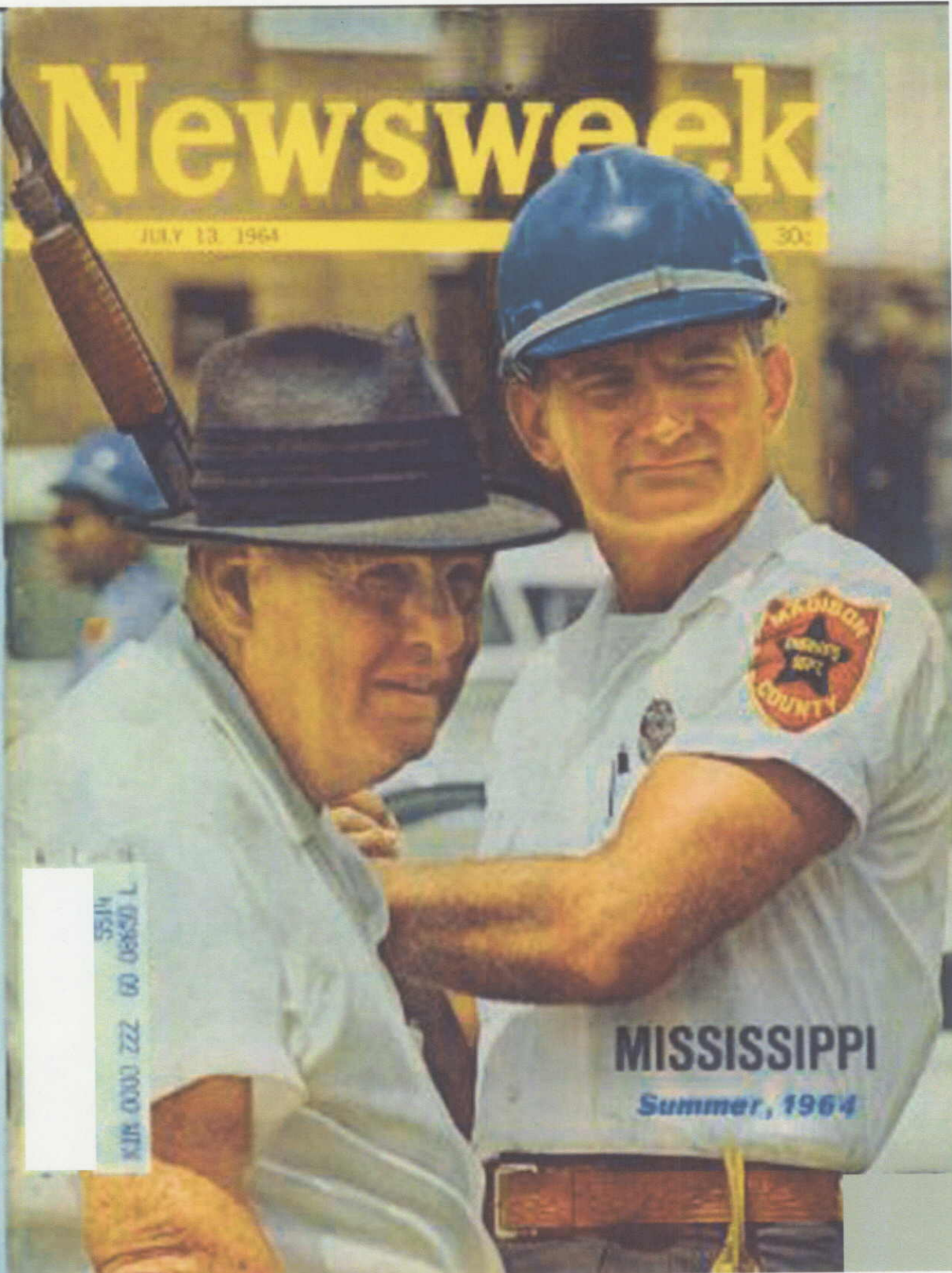


Newsweek

JULY 13, 1964

30¢



MISSISSIPPI

Summer, 1964

7 09860 00 722 0000 RTK
MISS
KJR 0000 ZZZ 00 08850 L

Looking for the Blues
Newsweek
July 13, 1964

One was Son House and he was born in Clarksdale where Bessie Smith died. Old recordings told how great he was, pure Delta blues, right from where it all began. House sang strong and his voice was heavy like a weight he dragged, but it came along at his bidding. The other was Skip James. He must have come from farther south; he played it easier, not so urgent, but much sadder. "Hard times here every- where you go."

No one knew whether they were alive or dead.

These two were the only great country blues singers still lost. Some like Huddie Ledbetter or Blind Lemon Jefferson were dead, and Ma Rainey too, who taught Bessie Smith. But the others were accounted for, Sleepy John Estes, Lightnin' Hopkins, Furry Lewis and many more. Just last year, Bukka White was found in the delta; and last winter whom did they find in Avalon tending cows but Mississippi John Hurt?

The search for these old-time bluesmen has always had a note of urgency about it. There's was our finest and oldest native-born music, the blues, country-style, pure and personal, always one Negro and a guitar lamenting misery, injustice, but still saying yes to life.

No wonder then the excitement last week when it was learned that both Son House and Skip James had been found. On a tip from Bukka White, young blues buffs John Fahey, Bill Barth and Henry Vestine, all under 25, drove from California to Mississippi and found Skip James in Tunica County Hospital, convalescing from a stomach disorder. Could he play? The doctor forbade James to try. But for all of them, contact was enough for the moment.

The search for Son House was not as direct. Dick Waterman and Phil Spiro from Cambridge and Nick Perls from New York combed the Mississippi Delta towns for sixteen days. and finally picked up a trail that led to Detroit. A call then gave them an address that sent them on a drive to Rochester, N .Y.

A Little Wine: A gentle, diffident man opened the door. This was Son House. Waterman said, "It's 8:33 a.m. gentlemen, Tuesday. After 4,000 miles, this was Son House, inviting them in and explaining that working on the railroad had brought him to Rochester .

Later they played tapes and Son House would say. "That is Charlie Patton" or "John Hurt" and once, "why that's Robert, Robert Johnson. "You taught him didn't you?" I reckon I did, I did that. When the tape was his own he sat there, sometimes shaking his head. Sometimes bobbing it, not so much listening to himself as enjoying the idea.

"No," he said, I haven't played in four years. They came back with a guitar the next day but he could not make his fingers behave. A little wine eased the strain. First he began to recall snatches of songs, and then phrases, and finally whole songs with their complicated harmonies. "You sure they want to hear this old music?" he asked of- his marveling audience. The next day they taped his blues. By the end of the week. record companies were actively competing for him and this month's Newport Folk Festival had happily altered its plans in order to make way for the return of Son House.