

BIOGRAPHY

James “Yank” Rachell was the primary exponent of blues mandolin, although he also played guitar, violin, and harp and was a powerful singer and songwriter. Yank was born on a farm outside of Brownsville, Tennessee in March of 1910. Yank Rachell picked up the mandolin at the age of eight, mainly teaching himself with help from an early encounter with “Hambone” Willie Newbern.

Rachell began to work dances with singer and guitarist “Sleepy” John Estes in the early 1920’s. In early 1929, he helped form the Three J’s Jug Band with Estes and pianist Jab Jones. The Three J’s Jug Band was an instant hit and worked many dances during the lucrative Jug Band craze located in and around Memphis, Tennessee. The group recorded 14 sides all credited to Estes and Rachell for Victor in 1929 and 1930.

The “Great Depression” stopped the recording business and caused the end of the Three J’s. Estes and Hammie Nixon moved on to Chicago to seek their fortune in the nightclubs, but Yank Rachell decided to try his hand at farming and also worked for the L&N Railroad. Ironically, it was Rachell who was the next to record—during a stopover in New York City Rachell teamed up with guitarist Dan Smith and recorded 25 titles for ARC in just three days.

Shortly before the ARC date, Yank discovered a young harp player that he thought had a special talent, John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson. They worked together at the Blue Flame Club in Jackson, Tennessee starting in 1933. In 1934 Williamson went north to Chicago. With the success of Williamson’s first Bluebird recordings of 1937, Rachell decided to join Sonny Boy in Chicago for recording sessions in March and June of 1938. Yank Rachell also contributed four sides of his own to each session and then sixteen more in 1941 with Williamson backing him up. Some of the 1941 recordings are among his best: “It Seems Like a Dream, Biscuit Bakin’ Woman, and Peach Tree Blues were all successes for Rachell and Bluebird.

In 1938, during the peak of Rachell’s musical career, and while working in St. Louis with Peetie Wheatstraw, Yank Rachell married and began to raise a family. Yank kept his day job and did not lead the “women, whiskey, and rambling” lifestyle of his contemporaries. After the murder of Sonny Boy on June 1, 1948 Rachell drifted away from music and held straight jobs to make his living. In 1958 with the death of Yank’s in-laws he moved his family to Indianapolis where his wife still had family. Rachell began to perform more regularly after his wife passed away in 1961. In 1962 Yank was reunited

with Sleepy John Estes and Hammie Nixon. The trio began to tour extensively in conjunction with the "Folk Boom" and recorded for Delmark as Yank Rachell's "Tennessee Jug Busters". With the death of Sleepy John in 1977 Rachell became a solo act. Yank played regularly around Indianapolis and traveled on occasion playing folk and blues festivals around the United States. Yank also continued to write songs and record while also gaining an interest in playing electric mandolin blues. Yank's last recording was in 1996 and he died in April of 1997.