

## Yank Rachell 1910-1997

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*My baby left town, she left me a mule to ride,  
My baby left town, she left me a mule to ride,  
When the train left the station, the mule lay down and died.*  
-- Yank Rachell, - "She Caught the Katy"

Blues mandolinist Yank Rachell, composer of She Caught the Katy, Gravel Road Woman, Divin' Duck Blues, and dozens of other classic country blues songs, died on April 9, aged 87. His death robs us of one of the last living links to the Memphis string bands of the 1920s.

He was born March 16, 1910, to a farming family in Brownsville Tennessee. He was christened James Rachell, but his grandmother nicknamed him Yank as a child, and the name stuck. When he was eight years old, his family gave him a piglet to care for and raise, but he traded it for a mandolin and taught himself to play.

As a young teenager, he worked as a track hand for the L&R railroad, and picked up extra spending money performing with Hambone Wille Newbern at dances and parties. Sometime in the 1920s, he met and began performing with guitarist Sleepy John Estes, eventually moving to Memphis to form the Three J's Jug Band with harmonica player Jab Jones. Estes and Rachel recorded several songs for RCA in 1929, including the original versions of Diving Duck Blues, Poor John Blues and Milk Cow Blues.

During the thirties and forties he performed with John Lee Sonny Boy Williamson, Peetie "The Devil's Son-in-Law" Wheatstraw, Elijah Jones, Henry Townsend and Big Joe Williams. Between 1938 and 1941 he recorded 24 songs for RCA's Bluebird label.

But none of this work provided enough income to support a family, so his musical career took second place to farming and factory work for over thirty years. Not until his four children had grown and his wife had passed away was he able to return to the uncertain life of a full-time blues musician. In 1962, he again partnered with Sleepy John Estes. Together they toured coffee houses and campuses as key figures in the blues revival: They toured Europe and Japan, and played virtually every blues and folk festival in North America.

Rachell and his family had moved to Indianapolis in 1958. After Estes' death in 1977, he returned there to semi-retirement, although he continued to record and perform. Some of Yank's best material was recorded during the last years of his life.