

WAITIN' FOR A TRAIN

by Daryl Henry

EXT. VICTOR STUDIOS/NEW YORK CITY DAY

Establish the Victor Recording Studios on East 24th Street, a thoroughfare dulled by the Great Depression.

INT. VICTOR STUDIOS/REHEARSAL ROOM DAY

Stretched on a bare cot is a gaunt, balding MAN in a crumpled linen suit, his arms wrapped around his chest. He puffs occasionally on a cigarette that pokes up at the galvanized ceiling from between his slightly bucked teeth. He is 35, looks ten years older.

Behind him, a broad-bodied, broad-minded nurse enters, pauses. CORA BEDELL, wearing an unstarched uniform, dispells a momentary sadness, then advances boldly.

CORA

Mr. Peer's waiting on you, Jimmie.

JIMMIE RODGERS sits erect, butts his cigarette.

JIMMIE

(wrinkled grin)

Hell, I guess I got another one in me.

Cora gives him one of a bulge of lemons she carries in the pocket of her cardigan. He bites into it, killing the bitterness with a swallow from a flask of bourbon. He shudders, clears his throat, stands up. He is not nearly as tall, skinny, big-eared or stoop-shouldered as he looks.

INT. VICTOR STUDIOS/RECORDING ROOM DAY

We are watching through the glass of the rudimentary engineer's booth, listening to Jimmie's high, lonesome VOICE fill the studio. He is propped up on pillows in an easy chair leaning close to a mike placed low in front of his steel-stringed guitar, thoroughly enjoying himself with *NO HARD TIMES*:

JIMMIE (V.O.)

... Goin' to buy all my children a brand new pair of shoes; goin' to buy all my children a brand new pair of shoes-- I'm goin' to quit singin' these doggone hardtime blues...

Watching Jimmie over the shoulders of the elderly engineer, MCGILL, are nurse Cora and record producer RALPH PEER, a fair-haired man with penetrating eyes and an ear for unorthodox talent.

(CONTINUED)

PEER

The more he hurts, the better he
seems to get. How does he do it?

MCGILL

Whiskey.

CORA

Guts.

OUTSIDE ON JIMMIE

Alone in his chair. Sweat rolls down his face, detouring
around his irrepressible Irish smile.

JIMMIE

... I'm goin' to hitch my mule, I'm
goin' to take a holt of my lines;
I'm goin' to hitch my mule, take a
holt of my lines-- don't want no
more of these doggone old hard
times...

He concludes with a flourish, clears his throat, looks to
the booth.

THROUGH THE GLASS

Ralph Peer holds his clasped hands over his head, signaling
a cheer. Cora claps enthusiastically, although her applause
is silent behind the glass.

EXT. EAST 24TH STREET DAY

In a deserted doorway across the street, two reasonably
well-dressed men huddle collars-up over a jam-tin kerosene
stove boiling tea in a blackened kettle. They stare over
at:

EXT. VICTOR STUDIOS DAY

Jimmie as he moves unsteadily out the door and climbs into
the back seat of a Cadillac sedan. Following him just
close enough to help if needed, Cora slides in beside the
driver-- CLIFF BASS, former auto mechanic, now Jimmie's
chauffeur and pal, a raw-boned young man who wears his
peaked cap turned sideways.

The HOBOS watch enviously from their doorway home.

INSIDE THE CAR

Cliff leans over the seat-back; crooked grin.

CLIFF

Where to, Jimmie?

JIMMIE

(wistful)

How about Mississippi?

(CONTINUED)

CLIFF
Well now, how about Coney Island?

JIMMIE
(brightening)
Hell, I guess that'll do all right.

Cliff throws the car into gear and rolls into traffic.

EXT. BROOKLYN STREET DAY

The Cadillac glides down a cheerless street, pulls up at a level crossing while a freight train GRINDS slowly by.

EXT. FREIGHT TRAIN DAY

A long-eared MAN wearing an oily bandana around his rooster neck leans off the caboose, squints into the back seat of the Cadillac and gives the thumbs-up sign.

INT. BACK SEAT OF CADILLAC DAY

Alarmed, Jimmie sits quickly erect. He rolls down the window to get a better look.

EXT. FREIGHT TRAIN DAY

The brakeman waves so-long as the caboose wobbles down the track.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FREIGHTYARDS/MERIDIAN, MISSISSIPPI DAY

From the rear platform of a similar caboose the same man waves the same so-long to a weed-thin Jimmie, now aged 15. It is his father, AARON RODGERS, a crusty but affectionate widower.

AARON
(calling out)
You git the fire goin' in time for
supper, you hear?

FROM THE SIDE OF THE TRACKS

Jimmie waves his acknowledgement, continues carrying a sloshing pail of water toward a gaggle of black LABORERS taking their time shoveling gravel aboard a swaybacked flatcar. Before he gets there he begins to hear a bass VOICE singing an obscure blues TUNE. Fascinated, Jimmie bends over, peers under an adjoining boxcar to see:

A BLACK MAN PLAYING A WARPED GUITAR

Behind tiny wire-rimmed glasses his eyes dance in time to his fat-fingered STRUMMING. He eventually grins up, signals Jimmie to join him.