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About the Music: Foreclosure Blues

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By Ruth Morris



A migrant family from Tennessee, in Winter Haven, Florida/ Arthur Rothstein

"Foreclosure Blues" by Jerry Raven

Drought and economic decline had pushed many off their land. Crops, and jobs, had dried up. It was the 1930s. Families from Oklahoma and the surrounding area migrated west, emerging from the dust to remold their lives.

It was their gritty resilience that drew folk musician and producer Tom Naples, 58, to the Library of Congress several years ago. He'd become fascinated with stories from the Great Depression, and he was conducting research for an album.

What he found were stacks of photographs, many commissioned by the government, plus diaries and old audio recordings from migrant camps.

"The interviews were with people who were displaced," Naples said, "and they'd tell stories about the dust storms and how difficult life was on the road. And then some would say, '... and here's a song I made up.'"

Naples gathered more than a dozen of these off-the-cuff songs for the album and added a couple of his own. The result, [... Whose Names are Unknown](#), is a musical and multi-media project that takes its title from the first line of an eviction notice.

"To John and Mary Doe, whose names are unknown," it read.

"They evicted you from your farm and they didn't even take time to find out your name," Naples said.



Florida State Archives

As he worked on the album, the current economic recession hit. Naples began to see eerie similarities in what he was reading in diaries from the 1930s and what he was hearing on the evening news.

In particular, he was struck by recent stories of banks wildly handing out mortgages to people who had no business being so deep in debt.

"In the 1930s, it was banks who encouraged farmers to borrow more money, because the government had set ridiculously high prices for wheat," Naples said. "Bankers actually encouraged farmers to go into incredible debt with the idea that, at \$4 a bushel, 'You can pay this off.' And then the government lowered the price to 24 cents a bushel. Then there was the drought. People were in way over their heads."

Naples was also struck by the banks' response. During the Depression, he said, foreclosed farms wouldn't sell in auction—no one had money to buy them. So they were "tractored out." The term refers to leveling a farmhouse with a tractor, so distressed families couldn't live there.

Naples didn't find a song from the Great Depression that treated foreclosures specifically, so he wrote one. *Foreclosure Blues*, sung by Jerry Raven, is the song you'll hear [at the end of our radio story on Yanira Doyle](#)—a young woman struggling to keep her Miami Beach condo afloat in the real estate crisis.

Naples says the more he studied the Depression, the more he admired the people he read about. Many expressed gratitude for food and tents, but they mostly wanted work.

"People just rolled with it and just kept trying to find jobs," he said. "I tell my historian friends, 'This was America's finest hour, because these were Americans who just didn't roll over.'"



*Folk Musician and Producer Tom Naples/
Joan Crouse*

Since completing the album, Naples has also been hired by Buffalo State College to write and direct the music for their production of "The Grapes of Wrath," based on John Steinbeck's novel about a family of sharecroppers driven from their land during the Great Depression. Naples, who lives in Ellicottville, New York, is also the co-author of a play called "The American Deal."

When he is not studying American history, Naples plays guitar and banjo with The 198 String Band.

Asked if he normally researches a period so thoroughly before reaching for his guitar, Naples said: "Well, we have to have something to talk about between songs."

Click here to listen to clips from [...Whose Names are Unknown](#) and learn more about the album.

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