



CLASSIC HARMONICA BLUES

from SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS



Smithsonian Folkways



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Co-produced and annotated by Barry Lee Pearson and Jeff Place
SFW CD 40204 ©© 2012 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

- 1. Theme Song** - 2:54
Doctor Ross, the Harmonica Boss
(Isaiah Ross/Tradition Music Co., admin by Bug, BMI)
- 2. Heart in Sorrow** - 2:58
Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee
(Walter McGhee / Stormking Music, BMI)
- 3. Take Your Fingers Off It** - 2:52
Will Shade, Charlie Burse, and Gus Cannon
(Charles Burse-Jab Jones-Charles Pierce-Will Shade / Peer International Corp., BMI)
- 4. Nine Below Zero** - 3:33
Eddie Burns (Aleck Rice Miller / Arc Music Corp., BMI)
- 5. Bye Bye Bird** - 3:09
Charlie Sayles (Willie Dixon-Aleck Rice Miller / Arc Music Corp., BMI)
- 6. Gillum Blues** - 2:13
Jazz Gillum (Jazz Gillum)
- 7. Crow Jane Blues** - 1:58
Sonny Terry (arr. Carl Martin / Testament Music admin by Bug, BMI)
- 8. Dog Days of August** - 4:09
John Cephas and Phil Wiggins (Phil Wiggins / John Cephas Inc., BMI)
- 9. Minglewood Blues** - 3:41
John Sebastian and the J Band (with Annie Raines) (Noah Lewis / Peer International Corp., BMI)
- 10. Good Morning Little School Girl** - 3:36
Doctor Ross, the Harmonica Boss
(John Lee Williamson / Arc Music Corp., BMI)
- 11. Sweet Home Chicago** - 4:15
Phil Wiggins and the Robert Johnson Tribute Band (Robert Johnson / King of Spades Music, BMI)
- 12. One Way Out** - 2:25
Eddie Burns (Elmore James-Aleck Rice Miller-Marshall Seahorn / Arc Music Corp. - Gulf Coast Music LLC, BMI)
- 13. Boogie Baby** - 2:30
Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee
(Walter McGhee / Stormking Music, BMI)
- 14. Low Down Blues** - 4:08
Neal Pattman (Neal Pattman)
- 15. Hooka Tooka** - 2:25
Chambers Brothers (Joseph Chambers-Willie Chambers / Vault Music Publishing, BMI)
- 16. Train Piece** - 5:07
Charlie Sayles (Charlie Sayles)
- 17. Chicago Breakdown** - 3:40
Doctor Ross, the Harmonica Boss
(Isaiah Ross / Hi-Lo Music Inc., BMI)
- 18. I Feel So Good** - 2:00
Warner Williams and Jay Summerour (William Bronzy / Songs of Universal Inc., BMI)
- 19. Barbara Allen Blues** - 1:26
Roscoe Holcomb
- 20. Custard Pie** - 2:48
Sonny Terry and unknown washboard band
(Sonny Terry / TRO-Hollis Music Inc., BMI)

INTRODUCTION

Jeff Place

These recordings, part of the *Classic* series released by Smithsonian Folkways to draw attention to significant recordings in our collection, highlight performances of harmonica blues. Many of these recordings come from the collection of Folkways Record founder, Moses Asch. On recent releases we have begun to delve into some of the 45 years of fine recordings that exist in another collection from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (formerly Festival of American Folklife). Both these collections are part of the larger Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, the folklife collection at the Smithsonian Institution.

Moses Asch ran a recording studio in New York City starting in 1939, and his first label was Asch Records. Among the blues musicians that recorded for Asch Records were Lead Belly, Champion Jack Dupree, Josh White, and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. He followed with the Disc Recordings of America label, then Folkways in 1948.

Some of the Folkways recordings, such as those of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, were made by Asch in his studio, but many were supplied by fieldworkers like Samuel Charters and Art Rosenbaum (who recorded Will Shade and Neal Pattman, respectively). Some are from more recent Smithsonian Folkways releases (Cephas and Wiggins, Williams and Summerour).

The other part of this collection comes from recordings made during the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife from 1969–1987. These recordings recently have been digitized thanks to a preservation grant from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. This grant allowed us to hear many recordings that had not been played in years. Starting in 1967, the festival featured wonderful traditional regional musicians from the United States and abroad. All of these were recorded on open-reel audiotape or cassette tape. The festival grew in size each year during the early 1970s,

culminating in the massive Bicentennial celebration in 1976. The festival lasted for twelve weeks and featured musicians from every corner of the United States.

Recordings of artists that appear on Folkways or Smithsonian Folkways can be sampled by visiting the Smithsonian Folkways website.



Eddie Burns, 1987. Courtesy of Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution.

HARMONICA BLUES

Barry Lee Pearson

As the 19th century drew to a close, several changes occurred that would shape the course of 20th-century American music. The first involved the democratization and rapid dissemination of the harmonica and the guitar; the second was the emergence of a new African American song form called blues. The former, thanks to mail order houses and mass production, allowed a greater number of Americans relatively easy access to affordable musical instruments. This particularly benefited those who had been marginalized by race, class or region. The latter, blues, provided a new expressive format that brought even more voices into America's musical conversation. These voices would become central to the country's musical personality, influencing a spectrum of music forms, including gospel, country, and rock and roll.

Although there is still debate over the exact origin of the harmonica, most sources credit German clockmaker Christian Friedrich Ludwig Buschmann with cobbling together a prototype composed of fifteen-pitch pipes in 1821. He called his creation a "mundaeoline" (German for mouth harp), a name it still goes by. For several decades other clockmakers and craftsmen helped refine and disseminate the instrument. In 1857 another German clockmaker, Matthias Hohner, realized there was more potential in harmonicas than clocks, and he began to concentrate on the then-handcrafted instrument.

According to company lore drawn from a 1950s promotional pamphlet, *The Story of the Hohner Harmonica and How to Play Them*, Hohner, his spouse and one assistant managed in their first year to produce six hundred and fifty instruments. By 1869 he began tapping into the American market by sending harmonicas to German immigrants. Soon, however, sales expanded to the general population, reaching Americans as diverse as Abraham Lincoln and Billy the Kid.

By 1896 harmonica imports numbered in the millions, and the Hohner Company

celebrated its fortieth anniversary by introducing a commemorative 1896 model, which they named “Marine Band.” The ten-hole harmonica was available in six keys: A, Bb, C, D, E, and F; sold for fifty cents; and remains in production to the present day. At the time of its introduction, “the Marine Band” also had patriotic appeal, calling to mind John Phillip Sousa, who was then director of the United States Marine Band. One of the country’s best-loved composers, his military marches and patriotic songs were among the most popular tunes of the day.

Prior to the advent of sound recordings and radio, music making was a home-grown affair for much of America. Besides listening to Sousa compositions played by hometown brass bands, middle-class Americans formed mandolin societies and banjo orchestras or, if they could afford it, showed off their status with a piano. During the 19th century the fiddle and banjo dominated the string band tradition, but soon other mail order instruments began to gain popularity, especially the guitar. In 1894 Sears and Roebuck offered seven models from as low as four dollars, allowing the guitar to reach even the most isolated areas, where it became a favorite component in a variety of vernacular styles. While it had a long history as an upper class instrument, it now became the people’s instrument of choice and would go on to become the 20th century’s greatest musical success story.

But when it came to blues, the harmonica ran a close second. A closer look at the number of artists who played harmonica, then graduated to guitar—or who play both—reveals a clearer perspective on the harmonica’s role within the blues tradition. Among the former we count legends such as Muddy Waters, Robert Nighthawk, Buddy Moss, Jimmy Rogers, and Otis Rush. Among the latter, Howlin’ Wolf, Jimmy Reed, Robert Johnson, Little Walter, Doctor Ross, Eddie Burns, and Louis Myers stand out.

The turn of the century also witnessed the arrival of what became the 20th century’s most influential musical form—blues. In 1902 the “mother of the blues,” Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, heard blues from an unaccompanied woman vocalist in St. Louis and incorporated it in her traveling show. The next year, band leader and composer W.C. Handy, allegedly the “father of the blues,” heard an itinerant guitar player in

Tutwiler, Mississippi. The man was playing his guitar slide, or knife style, and singing a train-related verse about going where “...the Southern crossed the Dog.” Rainey put blues on the vaudeville stage as vocal music with piano, jug band or jazz band orchestral accompaniment. Handy converted what he heard to a sheet-music format for piano or band accompaniment or interpretation.

At the folk level the instruments most commonly associated with blues were piano, guitar and harmonica, but the piano remained both expensive and stationary. The guitar and harmonica were not only cheap but portable, and this quality contributed to the rapid dissemination of blues throughout the south, up along the Mississippi and Ohio River cities and into the railroad, coal mine, and road gang work camps. Such sudden access to harmonica and guitar, especially in the rural south, led to innovative ways of playing these instruments. Because the new consumers were largely illiterate and most couldn't read music, they played in ways that sounded good to them, essentially playing them by ear.

While America has a long history of musical interaction, black music blossomed at the end of the 19th century with the advent of ragtime, ballads, blues and jazz, and a black aesthetic became more assertive. While Rainey and Handy helped transform blues from regional folk music to nationally heard popular culture, black vernacular musicians were altering the way American music would be played. They shifted the rhythmic emphasis and introduced methods of playing that adhered to African-derived musical values. There was new emphasis on call and response, or antiphonal, patterns in which other voices or instruments repeat or respond to the lead vocal line. By extension, the musicians developed techniques that gave instruments the capacity for imitating vocally derived sounds, as well as the voice's capacity for expressing emotion.

These aesthetic preferences were applied to the guitar and harmonica. With the guitar, the trick involved transcending its fret placement, which was set up to fit European scale preferences. This was done by incorporating slide, or bottleneck, techniques by sliding up or down to a specific note or bending notes by pushing strings across the fret board to achieve the same effect. The interplay between voice and guitar

demanded that the guitar not only provide rhythmic backup, but also act as a second voice, responding to the guitarist's vocal line.

The harmonica posed the same problem as the guitar in that it, too, was set up to play a European scale. Because the notes were fixed internally, apparently beyond manipulation, the process of shifting it to an African American system was made even more challenging. This demanded a more radical solution: the invention of a new way of playing called cross-harp, or playing in second position. In simple terms, this means playing the harmonica backwards. That is, shifting emphasis to the draw notes instead of the blow notes or, to put it another way, using a C harmonica to play in the key of G. Harmonica virtuoso Phil Wiggins explains the process:

“The harmonica was basically a European instrument, I mean, most of them come from M. Hohner who was German, and they played waltzes and marches and things like that on it. And when black people took hold of them, they immediately wanted to have [harmonicas] vocalize, have them imitate your voice, have them express emotion and feeling the way your voice can. So, rather than play the ten-hole harmonica in the key it was set up to be played in, where you would use mainly blow notes for your melody line, they kind of played it backwards, where you used draw notes for your melody line. That's called 'second position' when I play in the key that's a fifth above the key that the harmonica is set up in. And the number two hole draw gives you the root note of the key, and mostly your melody line is draw notes which allows you to bend the notes which is the thing that makes the harmonica vocalize, because bending the notes is the way that you slur the notes in order to imitate your voice and to be really expressive. And the combination of using your hands to shape the notes as they come out, and bending the notes, makes the harmonica imitate our voice in a clear way”

There are other positions used by blues players. For example Walter Horton played in as many as five, that also involve bending notes, and all demand a good deal of physical exertion (as the terms bending, worrying, or choking imply). The blues harmonica player usually shows the strain on his face, although some strain more than others to pull difficult notes from an instrument that was never intended to produce them.

Moreover, these techniques were not part of the harmonica producer's design—nor were they approved of. The same 1950 Hohner booklet mentioned earlier also states, “There is nothing awkward, forced, or strained about harmonica playing,” implying that these black innovations were not part of the company's perspective on how the harmonica ought to be played. In fact, the booklet warns against over-blowing because it puts too much strain on the reeds, shortening the life span of the instrument, and while this may be true, it didn't stop blues musicians whose harmonicas routinely go bad from overplaying and have to be replaced.

Hohner and company did not acknowledge these blues-derived techniques. Blues was not considered respectable music, especially for children. The same held true of other forms of vernacular music and even to the instruments associated with certain folk styles. The guitar, for example, like the fiddle before it, was sometimes referred to as the “Devil's box” and playing blues on such instruments, according to some religious groups, would lead you straight to hell.

On the other hand, such instruments could also be used to play gospel music, and various Pentecostal denominations embraced them. Nevertheless, the harmonica remained an ambivalent instrument. Its size, popularity, and price tag also cast it as less than respectable, a child's toy, a novelty instrument, or at best a teaching tool from which one would hope to graduate to a more reputable instrument. And, no matter how hard harmonica companies and players tried to improve its image, it never completely lost these lower-class associations.

While we may never know the name of the anonymous genius who found the “Devil's music” in Hohner's harmonica, the first artist to record blues in second position and take advantage of the harmonica's capacity for emulating the human voice was Alabamian Burl “Jaybird” Coleman, who recorded some twenty sides from 1927 to 1930.

The harmonica's versatility also contributed to its popularity. It could serve as a second responsorial voice for the solo blues or gospel vocalist, it could take the place of the violin in jug band or string band ensembles, and, with the advent of amplifica-

tion, it could even fill in for brass or reed lead instruments. The harmonica came into its own as a lead instrument in the immediate post-war years of the rhythm and blues era. Following the decline of the big bands, the saxophone reigned supreme as the lead solo instrument of rhythm and blues; but boosted by electricity, the harmonica could match the saxophone's vocal expressiveness. Whereas non-amplified artists, such as Jazz Gillum, recorded extensively in Chicago in the 1930s, the second half of the 1940s belonged to a new wave of musicians who mastered the nuances of the new amplified sound. In the hands of technicians, such as Snooky Pryor and John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, the once lowly mouth harp became the Mississippi saxophone.

Among this first wave of Chicago-based blues stars, John Lee Williamson, whom blues players refer to as Sonny Boy Number 1, stands out. A songwriter of exceptional talent as well as a charismatic performer, he made numerous hit records for the Bluebird label and was a much in-demand club performer. According to Chicago blues folklore, he put the harps in the union, meaning that in his hands the harmonica achieved the status of a legitimate instrument, and the harmonica player was recognized as a professional musician—even an out-front star. Following his murder in 1948, other musicians took his place, including Little Walter Jacobs, who came to Chicago in 1946. Perhaps more than anyone he took full advantage of the whole range of stylistic innovation that amplification offered. His closest competitor was Walter Horton, who traveled back and forth between Chicago and Memphis.

Another major figure, Sonny Boy Williamson Number 2 (born Aleck Miller) had almost as much impact. He became a radio star on station KFFA in Helena, Arkansas where he influenced aspiring harpists throughout the south, particularly in the Delta. Although he recorded for Checker in Chicago, he spent most of his life in and around Helena, first as a walking musician who worked with the likes of Robert Johnson, then as a radio star, and finally as a blues emissary to Europe where he worked with various British rock bands. The Mississippi and Memphis pipeline to Chicago produced many other fine harmonica players including Junior Wells, James Cotton, Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf and Junior Parker.

In the Southeast and New York City one figure, Sonny Terry, dominated the blues harmonica tradition, although other artists recorded, including Georgian Buster Brown. But the evolution of an electric rhythm and blues ensemble sound never developed as it did in Chicago. Instead, the southeastern tradition remained a back porch acoustic style more successfully marketed as folk music than as rhythm and blues.

The dozen harmonica players featured on this CD come from seven different states, and as expected, the majority were born in the South. Eddie Burns, Lester Chambers, Jazz Gillum, and Doctor Ross were from Mississippi. Will Shade came from southwestern Tennessee abutting the Mississippi Delta. Neal Pattman and Sonny Terry hail from Georgia in the Southeast. Roscoe Holcomb was from Kentucky, Jay Summerour from Maryland, and Phil Wiggins from the District of Columbia. Finally, Annie Raines and Charlie Sayles come from Massachusetts and were weaned in the fertile folk revival community of Cambridge.

The selections on this recording fall into several stylistic categories, including a jug band style often associated with the city of Memphis. This good-time street corner sound developed in various southern cities in the 1920s and 1930s, and was revived in the 1960s. Basically an ensemble format, it employs novelty effects, makeshift instruments including washboards and jugs. The other artists associated with the style are Annie Raines and Will Shade of the Memphis Jug Band. Jazz Gillum also worked in this format in his younger days.

A second major category would be the southeastern or Piedmont tradition. Best exemplified by its dominant practitioner Sonny Terry, it also characterizes the work of Neal Pattman, Jay Summerour, and Phil Wiggins, the latter two citing Terry as a major stylistic influence. More of an acoustic tradition, it shows the influence of the earlier string band traditions central to the country dances of the region.

Third, there is the Mississippi to Midwest style that was developed in the South and refined in northern cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit. This tradition is represented by Eddie Burns, who moved from the Delta to Iowa and then to Detroit; Jazz Gillum, who moved from Mississippi to Chicago; and Doctor Ross, who moved

from Mississippi's Delta to Flint, Michigan.

Finally, there are the more idiosyncratic stylings of Roscoe Holcomb, who applies his high lonesome sound to an old Child ballad; the Mississippi gospel/rock sound of Lester Chambers and his brothers; and the street-corner pyrotechnics of Charlie Sayles. All play in their own style, influenced but not exclusively determined by their regional background. Such a talented cast is not limited to any one style any more than these artists are limited to blues, and their musical voice is as much influenced by those they listened to, those they played with, and their ages, as well as where they come from.

As with most folk music, this variation comes from a combination of accident, creativity and technology. Because the majority of artists were self-taught or learned from watching others, some learned the "wrong way" which then turned out to be the right way for them, giving them a unique sound. Take, for example, Doctor Ross, whose father played harmonica but would not allow his son to touch it. When his sister got married she bought him four harmonicas that he shared with his siblings; but he happened to be left-handed:

"I learned how to play, but they played theirs the right way. They played with the coarse keys to the left and the fine ones to the right. But I grabbed it backwards because I'm left-handed and everything I do is just from the opposite way. So, I have my coarse keys to the right, and my fine ones to the left. Well, that's backwards. Everybody see me, [they] say, 'He ain't gonna learn to play. Yeah, he's blowing it backwards.' But I just kept on playing it, and they loved my style better than theirs."

By playing in a way that felt most comfortable, Doctor Ross developed his own sound (and did much the same later on when he learned to play the guitar). Eddie Burns was also left-handed, learning to play with the harmonica turned over with the low notes on the right side. According to Burns, blues legend Little Walter did the same thing.

With the addition of African American harmonica techniques, today's musician has style choices undreamt of one-hundred years ago. Moreover, today's aspirant can choose from myriad makes and models as well as various "How to Play" manuals.

Most proficient harmonica players, including those featured here, learn by ear or through the oral tradition, listening closely to others, internalizing what they hear, and reproducing it as best they can through trial and error.

I hope this compilation can also play a part, inspiring new players to carry harmonica blues into the 21st century.



L to R: Barry Lee Pearson, Phil Wiggins, John Cephas. Courtesy of Barry Lee Pearson.

THE SONGS

Barry Lee Pearson and Jeff Place

1. Theme Song

Isaiah Ross, harmonica and vocal (from: festival tape 1987-CT-248; recorded July 4, 1987)

Charles Isaiah Ross (1925–1999) was born in Tunica in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. His father, who played harmonica and bugle, was his first inspiration. He learned to play at age six, and by the time he was a teen he was playing house parties and local juooks, often working with the Silver Kings Band. During World War II he was on duty in the Pacific Theater with the 24th Infantry. Returning from the service, he worked in local radio (WROX in Clarksdale, KFFA in Helena, Arkansas, and WDIA in Memphis). He rejoined the Army in 1950, then returned to Memphis in 1951 to play and record as Doctor Ross and His Jump and Jive Boys. In 1951 he recorded “Country Clown,” and “Doctor Ross Boogie,” for Sam Phillips, who sent the cuts to Chicago’s Chess Records. He later recorded for Phillips’s new Sun label, scoring a hit in 1953 with “Chicago Breakdown.” His “Theme Song” dates back to his radio work in Helena. It was common at the time for blues artists to have a theme touting the virtues of their sponsor. As Ross recalls, “I had a contract with Charlie Katz, who had a five and dime store, and I wrote a song about it. I would come on every morning at six o’clock, Monday through Friday.” His sponsor, Katz Clothing Store, was located on Cherry Street.

2. Heart in Sorrow

Sonny Terry, harmonica and vocal; Brownie McGhee, guitar and vocal; Gene Moore, drums.
(From: *Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing*, Smithsonian Folkways, 40011, 1990/
Folkways 2327, 1958)

Born Saunders Terrell (1911–1986) in Greensboro, Georgia, Sonny Terry learned harmonica from his father. After losing his sight, he began to perform as a street musician in the Raleigh/Durham area, eventually teaming up with North Carolina's most influential guitarist, Blind Boy Fuller (1907–1941). Fuller's manager, J.B. Long, set up a recording session in 1937 that also included Dipper Boy Council. In 1938 Terry also appeared in John Hammond's *From Spirituals to Swing* concert, and continued to record with Fuller through 1940. Following Fuller's death, Terry relocated to New York City and teamed up with Brownie McGhee (1915–1996), a native of Knoxville, Tennessee. He continued to record and first appeared on Broadway in *Finian's Rainbow*. Terry and McGhee also performed in the original 1955 production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Their musical partnership would last a lifetime, earning them both a National Heritage Fellowship in 1982.

“Heart in Sorrow” features a vocal duet, and is based on Blind Boy Fuller's 1940 Okeh recording, “Lost Lover Blues,” that took place at Fuller's last session. A well-known Piedmont blues standard, it's been credited to and recorded by Elizabeth Cotten as “Ain't Got No Honey Baby Now.” It was also recorded by John Cephas and Phil Wiggins under the title “I Ain't Got No Loving Baby Now.”

3. Take Your Fingers Off It

Will Shade, harmonica and vocals; Charlie Burse, tenor guitar and vocal; Gus Cannon, jug (from: *American Skiffle Bands* Folkways 2610, 1957, recorded by Sam Charters, December 5, 1956)

“Take Your Fingers Off It (And Don't You Dare Touch It, You Know It Don't Belong to You)” is a standard jug band hokum piece known by dozens of titles. This piece originally was recorded by the Memphis Jug Band for Vocalion in 1934, although

an earlier song with the same title was done by Mary Stafford in 1926. Here, some twenty-two years later, surviving members of the original group reprise it for field collector Sam Charters. Shade had been working at a tire plant, Burse as a house painter, and Cannon as a handy man when they recorded this session.

Shade (1898–1966) was a lifetime Memphian who played guitar and harmonica, the instrument he was most known for. Also known as Son Brimmer, he worked off and on with versions of the Memphis Jug Band, first recording in 1927–1934, and making a comeback of sorts in the early 1960s. Charlie Burse (1901–1967), best known for his talent on the ukulele, moved from Alabama to Memphis in 1928, and along with being co-founder of the Memphis Jug Band, recorded briefly with his own band, Charlie Burse and the Memphis Mudcats, in 1939. Shade was influenced by the playing of Clifford Hayes’s Louisville Jug Band enough to start a group of his own. Like many of his contemporaries in Memphis, Shade had spent time with the medicine shows. As of 1909, alcohol sales were illegal in Tennessee except in Memphis. Beale Street in Memphis was wide open and musicians gravitated to it. By the 1920s, there were a number of jug bands working Beale. Handy’s Park in Memphis was a round-the-clock party, and the group also found a home entertaining there for tips. (Place, notes to *Anthology of American Folk Music* SFW 40090).

Gus Cannon (1883–1979), also known as Banjo Joe, had his own group, Cannon’s Jug Stompers, which recorded out of Memphis 1927–1939 and was one of Beale Street’s most popular bands. After recording for Folkways in the mid 1950s, he performed on the college and festival circuit. After his Jug Stompers song “Walk Right In” became a hit for the Rooftop Singers in 1963, he and Will Shade recorded an album with the same title for Stax Records in 1963.

4. Nine Below Zero

Eddie Burns, harmonica and vocal (from: festival tape 1987-CT-250, recorded July 5, 1987)

Born in Belzoni, Mississippi, Burns (1928–) grew up around Clarksdale, Dublin, and Webb, all in the Delta. His father played harmonica, guitar, and piano. As a boy Burns found the region a hotbed of blues activity, with musicians such as Robert Johnson, Honeyboy Edwards and Sonny Boy Williamson Number 2 plying their musical wares at local juoks and on the streets. Influenced by the recordings of John Lee Williamson and the in-person performances of Sonny Boy Number 2, he soaked up the blues ambience of the region. At age eighteen he contracted with an Illinois Central Railroad labor agent, leaving Mississippi for Iowa. In 1948, following a path of the “Great Migration” to the north and Midwest, he moved to Detroit and joined a flourishing blues community composed of fellow Southerners. In Detroit he teamed up with fellow Clarksdale local John Lee Hooker, playing house parties and Hastings Street clubs. He also taught himself to play the guitar. In 1948, at the age of twenty, Burns first recorded with former Iowa traveling partner guitarist J.T. Smith as the Swing Brothers for the Palda label. In 1949 he accompanied John Lee Hooker on the Sensation label (and recorded with him again in 1951). He continued to record for another fifty years for a dozen labels: Deluxe, Harvey, Von, JVB, Checker, Evidence, Blue Suit, and Big Bear. Finally, in 2001, Burns cut a CD with his brother, Chicago guitarist Jimmy Burns, for the Delmark label. He also worked the club circuit when he could, while holding down a day job at Dodge Motors. In the 1980s he became more active on the festival circuit, including two European tours, and at age seventy-seven released his last recording, *Second Degree Burns*. “Nine Below Zero” comes from his old friend Sonny Boy Williamson Number 2, whom Burns used to back up when he visited Detroit. Williamson initially recorded the song for Jackson, Mississippi’s Trumpet label in 1951.

5. Bye Bye Bird

Charlie Sayles, harmonica and vocal (from: festival tape 1977-RR-048, recorded October 7, 1977)

Charlie Sayles (born 1948, Woburn, MA), from the Boston area, has a harmonica playing style notable for his free-form improvisations. Sayles has spent much of his life working as a street musician, primarily playing solo, but also at times with his former wife, Kerry, and Larry Wise. He also works as a one-man band, using a Hohner harmonica and microphone played through a small pig-nosed amplifier and a foot-operated high-hat.

Sayles began to play harmonica while serving in the Vietnam War, returning to the United States in 1971. The next year the primarily self-taught Sayles met a street musician in New York City who taught him how to make money from his music on the streets (Vorel 1993/94, 41). In 1975, folklorist Ralph Rinzler encountered Sayles playing on the streets of Greenwich Village. Impressed by his playing, Rinzler subsequently wrote an article about Sayles for the folk music magazine *Sing Out!* and helped get Charlie into the festival circuit.

Sayles settled in Washington, D.C. in the early 1980s, and started a band. Over the years he and his band, The Blues Disciples, have toured Israel, Asia, and Europe, and played numerous festivals. Unfortunately for blues fans, Sayles has released only four albums during his long career, including 2009's *Live and Uncut*. He continues to tour and can still be seen on the streets of Washington.

“Bye Bye Bird” comes from the recording by Sonny Boy Williamson 2 (Aleck Miller). Williamson recorded it for Chess in 1963. It was a popular hit among fans during his tours of Europe in the 1960s, and he recorded a version with the British rock group The Yardbirds.

6. Gillum Blues

Jazz Gillum, harmonica; Memphis Slim, piano; Arbee Stidham, guitar (from: *Blues by Jazz Gillum* Folkways 3826, 1961, recorded 1961)

This track features a collaboration between Memphis Slim and harmonica player William “Jazz” Gillum (1904–1966). Moving to Chicago in 1923, Gillum was the accompanist for a number of blues artists, especially Big Bill Broonzy and Washboard Sam. Along with Broonzy, Gillum was involved in the original recording of the blues tune and now-standard “Key to the Highway.” Gillum was shot to death in 1966. This piece has the feel of in-studio jam session.

7. Crow Jane Blues

Sonny Terry, harmonica and vocal; Brownie McGhee, guitar (from: *The Folkways Years* Smithsonian Folkways 40033, 1991, recorded 1959)

One of the best-known East Coast or Piedmont standards, this song was first recorded by North Carolina guitarist Julius Daniels for Victor in 1927. Carl Martin of Big Stone Gap, Virginia also recorded a “Crow Jane” for Bluebird in 1934. “Crow Jane” is an idiomatic, generally unflattering, term for a black woman. A standard eight-bar blues, it alternates between threats and praise, typical of the blues form. Terry recorded this version for Folkways in 1959, claiming he had initially learned it in the 1920s when it was already well known in the Piedmont region.

8. Dog Days of August

John Cephas, guitar and vocal, Phil Wiggins, harmonica (from: *Richmond Blues* Smithsonian Folkways 40179, 2008, recorded 2008)

John Cephas (1930–2009) and Phil Wiggins (1954–) were the premier Piedmont acoustic guitar/harmonica duet following the breakup of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, although the two duos bore little stylistic affiliation. Cephas and Wiggins

both were brought up in Washington, D.C., although Cephas later relocated to Woodford, Virginia. The duo met at the 1976 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where Cephas was working with Alabama pianist Wilbert “Big Chief” Ellis (1914–1977). They formed a group, The Barrelhouse Rockers, and played D.C.-area festivals until Ellis moved back to Alabama. Cephas and Wiggins continued as a duo, recording for various labels including Flying Fish, Merrimac, Alligator, and Smithsonian Folkways. Both musicians served on the Board of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, and were avid spokespersons for their regional tradition. Beginning in 1982, they also toured the world as cultural ambassadors for the blues, taught in various capacities, and acted in several plays and films.

9. Minglewood Blues

John Sebastian and the J-Band: Geoff Muldaur, mandolin and vocal; John Sebastian, guitar; Fritz Richmond, jug; Paul Rishell, guitar; Annie Raines, harmonica; James Wormworth, percussion (from: *The Harry Smith Connection* Smithsonian Folkways 40085, 1998, recorded October 1997, Vienna, Virginia)

Minglewood (Menglewood) was a lumber camp a few miles east of the Mississippi River near Dyersburg, Tennessee. Many of the Southern plantations and work camps featured entertainment and music on weekends, providing a place for musicians to find work. Noah Lewis (1895–1937) had worked there and composed this song. He recorded it for Victor under his own name as “New Minglewood Blues.” It was also recorded by the legendary Cannon’s Jug Stompers.

A number of the musicians involved in the folk revival of the late 1950s to early 1960s had been involved in playing jug band music in their early years. This group, the J-Band, marked a return to their roots and the music they loved. The group included John Sebastian (The Lovin’ Spoonful), and Geoff Muldaur and Fritz Richmond (The Jim Kweskin Jug Band). The J-Band enlisted the help of two fine young musicians from Cambridge, Massachusetts, guitarist Paul Rishell (born 1950) and harmonica player Annie Raines (born 1969). Raines began to play harmonica at age seventeen,

studying the work of the blues masters, including Noah Lewis. She formed a musical partnership with Rishell that has lasted almost two decades as of this writing. Their album *Moving to the Country* was awarded a W.C. Handy Blues Award.

10. Good Morning Little Schoolgirl

Isaiah Ross, harmonica and vocal (from: festival tape 1987-CT-215, recorded June 24, 1987)
For information on Doctor Ross, see Track 1.

“Good Morning Little School Girl” ranks among the most widely recorded of all blues songs. Written by John Lee Williamson (1914–1948) of Jackson, Tennessee, it was the first song Williamson ever recorded in 1937. For ten years he recorded prolifically for Bluebird, until he was murdered in 1948. Ross knew both Sonny Boy Number 1, as Williamson was known, and Aleck Miller, or Sonny Boy Number 2, who performed on KFFA (as did Ross). Although he admired both men as musicians, he clearly favored John Lee Williamson as a singer and harmonica stylist. As Ross recalled, he could play just like him:

“(Sonny Boy Number 2), he’d blow the harmonica, but he just couldn’t sing as good as the first Sonny Boy. That’s the only difference I see between them. That first Sonny Boy made that harmonica talk. He could just make it talk. So I loved them both, but I loved Number 1 best because I could play pieces just like him. The only way you could tell him from me, you see me sitting here and him sitting over there; and that’s the only difference. Cause in the way of playing, you couldn’t tell us apart.”

Sonny Boy Number 1 was the first major harmonica blues star with a string of hits to his credit. According to Ross, Sonny Boy Number 2 appropriated the name when he came to KFFA, in order to fool his listeners and to cash in on the other artist’s fame. But he never fooled his fellow blues musicians.

11. Sweet Home Chicago

Phil Wiggins, harmonica; Johnny Shines, guitar and vocals; Robert Jr. Lockwood, guitar and vocals; Henry Townsend, piano; Lonnie Pitchford, bass; Kent DuChaine, guitar (from: festival tape 1991-DAT-016, recorded July 1, 1991)

Part of a 1991 program entitled “Roots of Rhythm and Blues; A Tribute to the Robert Johnson Era,” this live recording took place at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. Spontaneous and unrehearsed, it’s performed by a multigenerational all-star blues jam band. The older generation who knew and worked with Robert Johnson, who was a harmonica player himself, included Johnny Shines (1915–1992), vocal and guitar; Robert Lockwood (1915–2006), vocal and guitar; and Henry Townsend (1909–2006) on piano. The younger musicians, who knew Johnson’s works via recordings and interpreters, were Kent DuChaine, guitar; Lonnie Pitchford (1955–1998), bass; and Phil Wiggins (1954–) on harmonica. The generations were further connected as DuChaine worked with Shines; Pitchford learned bass working with Lockwood; and Wiggins had sat in with Shines at previous festivals. Stylistically, the improvised version represents the Delta-to-Chicago continuum. Originally recorded by Johnson in 1937, “Sweet Home Chicago” was the third song he chose to record. It has ties to James Kokomo Arnold’s Decca recording of 1934, “Old Original Kokomo Blues.”

One of the most recycled blues ever written, the song is a traditional tribute to the pleasures of the Windy City, and extends an invitation that countless Mississippians accepted. In the process it has become Chicago’s major blues anthem.

12. One Way Out

Eddie Burns, harmonica and vocal (from: festival tape 1987-CT-247, recorded July 4, 1987)

For more information on Eddie Burns, see Track 4.

Burns claimed his major influences were John Lee Williamson, Sonny Boy Williamson Number 2, and Little Walter. He backed Williamson Number 2 on guitar in Detroit for

several years around 1957, but claimed, “I been knowing him just about all my life. I was living in Clarksdale and he was in Helena.” They first met in the 1930s, when musicians like Williamson and Robert Johnson walked the Delta, performing from town to town:

“When I first started paying attention to blues, I met Sonny Boy Williamson Number 2 as I was walking with a man down the road. Sonny Boy Williamson Number 2 used to travel from town to town and he walked a lot because he didn’t have no car. I guess maybe he probably was low on cash, and I guess he probably just worked his way across the country, you know, with his harmonicas. So this man was coming down old 49 Highway in Mississippi, and he had this belt around his waist and all these harmonicas on him. I was seven or eight, but I do remember what went on, and that’s going back a long ways. So as they approached each other this man that I was with asked Sonny Boy could he blow a little harmonica, and he said “Yeah,” and he blowed harp. So then he asked him about a particular tune which was Peetie Wheatstraw’s tune, a thing called ‘I’ll be So Glad When Good Whiskey Comes Back in Style Again.’ So he gave him a dime; well, this was back in 1936 or ’37, and Sonny Boy blowed it, and we were off on our way. In 1944 or ’45 I was just beginning to get into my tunes, and I ran into Sonny Boy again who had a live broadcast on KFFA Delta Network out of Helena, Arkansas.”

This piece was cut by Williamson 2 for Checker in 1961, and works the tried-and-true blues theme of a lover convinced he’s trapped by his girlfriend’s jealous husband. Another of Williamson’s guitarists, blues legend Elmore James, recorded it for Bobby Robinson’s Sphere Sound in New York City, and, finally, G.L. Crockett reprised it in Chicago on Four Star as “It’s a Man Down There.” Another well-known version of the song is by The Allman Brothers Band. It’s alternately titled, “Raise Your Window.”

13. **Boogie Baby**

Sonny Terry, harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar and vocal (from: *Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing* Smithsonian Folkways 40011, 1990/*Folkways* 2327, 1958)

After losing his sight Sonny Terry played the streets in the Raleigh-Durham area, earning tips from the tobacco market workers. For a number of years he partnered and recorded with Blind Boy Fuller. After Fuller's death, he hooked up with Knoxville's Brownie McGhee (1915–1996), relocating in New York City and recording for Moses Asch's Folkways label [now Smithsonian Folkways] from 1944 to 1959. Terry was one of the mainstays of Moses Asch's recording roster in the 1940s and 1950s, appearing alone, with Brownie, and as a musical collaborator with other Asch artists like Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Lead Belly, and Pete Seeger. Sonny and Brownie were among the most beloved of the blues groups during the folk song revival, and recorded for numerous labels.

14. **Low Down Blues**

Neal Pattman, harmonica and vocal (from: *Folk Visions and Voices: Traditional Music and Song in Northern Georgia, Volume Two* Folkways 34162, 1984, recorded by Art Rosenbaum, Georgia, December 30, 1977)

Born in Madison County, Georgia, Neal Pattman (1926–2005) was inspired by his father, who played guitar and harmonica. As a youngster, he cajoled his father into buying him a harmonica: "I told him, 'Daddy, I believe Santa Claus is going to bring me a harmonica for Christmas.' Back then you could get a harmonica for a dime. He did, and I got started. He used to play that piece about John Henry; that's the first piece I learned." Despite losing an arm at age nine, Pattman continued to play with his family: "I was fourteen years old, and the family, we used to pick cotton, [then] sit down under a shade tree. I'd be playing the harmonica, and some of my sisters and brothers be beating the old five-gallon can like a drum. I'd go empty my sack and come back across the field playing my harp."

Maintaining himself by working odd jobs around Athens, Georgia, he occasionally played the streets until his wife encouraged him to give up blues and join the church. However, he later returned to playing blues. In the 1980s and '90s he worked various festivals, sometimes in tandem with fellow Georgia guitarist Precious Bryant, and played in Europe, Australia, and Iceland. Pattman recorded for Erwin in 1995 and for Music Maker in 1998. This piece is a deep blues, expressing mistreatment and hard times. This song was recorded by folklorist Art Rosenbaum as part of a large body of recordings he made in North Georgia

15. Hooka Tooka

Lester Chambers, harmonica, vocals; George Chambers, bass; Willie Chambers, guitar; Joe Chambers, guitar; Brian Keenan, drums (from: *Groovin' Time* Folkways 31008, 1968)

The Chambers Brothers achieved fame as a rock band in the late 1960s, and their 1968 hit “Time Has Come Today” is considered a classic. Their musical roots, however, were formed in their birthplace in Flora, Mississippi on the edge of the Delta, and from the family gospel tradition. George, Willie, Lester, and Joe grew up in a sharecropping family, cutting their musical teeth at the Mount Calvary Baptist Church. George, the eldest brother, disembarked from the army in southern California, where his brothers soon joined him. By the early 1960s they were performing locally, applying their gospel quartet harmonies to folk songs, blues and gospel. In 1965 they performed in the New York area, playing the 1965 Newport Folk Festival and adding drummer Brian Keenan; in 1967 they signed with Columbia. The original band broke up in 1972 but reunited in 1974. Harmonica player Lester relocated to New York in 1980. This cut comes from the original Chambers Brothers album *Groovin' Time* (Folkways 31008), but was originally issued on the Riverside label in California.

“Hooka Tooka,” better known as “Green, Green Rocky Road,” derives from a children’s game song.

16. Train Piece

Charlie Sayles, harmonica and vocal (from: festival tape 1977-RR-048, recorded October 7, 1977)

For information on Charlie Sayles, see Track 6. This piece shows off the kind of music Sayles plays on the streets.

17. Chicago Breakdown

Isaiah Ross, harmonica and vocal (from: festival tape 1987-CT-215, recorded June 24, 1987)

For information on Doctor Ross, see Track 1.

This piece shows Ross in his full one-man-band format. He initially recorded it in Memphis for Sam Phillips's Sun label, and later in life referred to it as his hit. It also set up a rift between Ross and Phillips that led to Ross's leaving Memphis and moving to Flint, Michigan. According to Ross, he was not given the royalties he thought he deserved, claiming that Phillips used the money to upgrade his studio and promote his young protégé, Elvis Presley. But Ross held no grudge against young Elvis, stating that he even offered to teach him how to play harmonica. Moving to Flint, he worked for General Motors for thirty years, issued a single on his own DIR label, and recorded for Fortune and Hi-Q. Later in life he returned to music as a one-man band, touring the festival circuit and traveling to Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival. Despite the hoarseness of his voice, this recording is a fine example of his harmonica, guitar and drum coordination.

18. I Feel So Good

Warner Williams, guitar and vocal; Jay Summerour, harmonica (from: *Blues Highway* Smithsonian Folkways 40120, 2004)

This duo represents the part of Maryland just outside of Washington, D.C. Jay grew up in Rockville and initially learned harmonica from his grandfather, Smack Martin, who played local jooks and parties. His main inspiration and model was Sonny Terry, who

he later discovered was a distant family relation. Jay also traveled with the Starland Vocal Band and played in the Cambridge Harmonica Orchestra. About twenty years ago he began to team up with one of the region's finest, if somewhat unrecognized, guitar wizards, Warner Williams, who has been plying his musical wares in and around Maryland and Washington, D.C. for more than sixty years. A true songster, he plays everything: blues, gospel, country or pop standards. Like Cephas and Wiggins, they are practitioners of the time-honored East Coast harmonica/guitar duet tradition. Their brand of music has a definite urban touch, making for an intriguing blend of the old and the new. "I Feel So Good" is a blues standard closely tied to Big Bill Broonzy (1893–1958) who recorded it for Okeh/Columbia in 1941.

19. Barbara Allen Blues

Roscoe Holcomb, harmonica (from: *The High Lonesome Sound* Folkways 2368, 1965/*Untamed Sense of Control* Smithsonian Folkways 40144, 2003, recorded in New York City 1964)

Roscoe Holcomb (1912–1981) has "attained legendary status as a hard-hitting singer and banjo player although he has never been widely known" (John Cohen, notes to SFW 40104). Living most of his life around Daisy, Kentucky, Holcomb worked as a miner and at a lumber mill, unfortunately breaking his back in an accident at the latter.

Holcomb's music was a combination of Kentucky Mountain music, songs from the church, and African-American blues he learned. His sources were both human and recorded. Known for his heartfelt singing, Holcomb performed at folk festivals in the 1960s, was the subject of John Cohen's 1963 film *The High Lonesome Sound*, and received a Grammy nomination in 1965 for the album *High Lonesome Sound*.

When asked by John Cohen about the first music he had heard, Roscoe replied, "I know the best music I ever heard, the one I thought the most of was a harp, mouth harp. I would follow it—I was just a little fellow—I'd follow it a long ways to hear it

played” (notes to SFW 40104). Here Holcomb takes the centuries-old British ballad “Barbara Allen” and creates his own version for blues harp.

20. Custard Pie Blues

Sonny Terry, harmonica and vocals; This recording features a washboard band that includes washboard, washtub bass, frying pan, and probably J.C. Burris on bones and vocal (From: *Sonny Terry: The Folkways Years 1944-1963*, Smithsonian Folkways 40033, 1991/*Sonny Terry's Washboard Band*, Folkways 32006,1952)

Like “Take Your Finger Off It” and “Minglewood Blues,” this song illustrates the role of the harmonica in a jugband or, in this case, a washboard band. Such musical aggregations were commonplace, especially as urban street corner bands. They were particularly active in Memphis, Tennessee and Louisville, Kentucky, but could be found from Atlanta, Georgia to Dallas, Texas to Chicago, Illinois. Usually, they were comprised of a mix of novelty instruments, jugs, kazoos or jazz horns, washboards, washtub basses, as well as the more legitimate guitars, tipes, banjos or ukuleles, and the violin or harmonica to play lead melody. Sometimes these were children’s bands, but even major groups started out with such a makeshift format. For example, Jerry Daniels of the Indianapolis group The Ink Spots, claimed they started as what he termed a “coffee pot band,” explaining that they would play a kazoo into a coffee pot to increase its volume and novelty effect. But the harmonica, because of its cost and versatility, along with the jug, was the instrument most commonly tied to this ensemble tradition.

The song “Custard Pie Blues,” comes from a 1939 Vocalian collaboration between Sonny Terry, Blind Boy Fuller, and washboard player, Bull City Red titled “I Want Some of Your Pie.” A mainstay of Terry’s repertoire, he recorded it a half dozen times over thirty years. The use of bakery products as sexual metaphors dates back to the vaudeville tradition when ‘jelly roll’ reigned supreme. Various food groups from fruit to meat and dairy products served a similar humorous function as does the common follow-up motif, or begging line, “...before you give it all away.”



Dr. Ross, 1987. Courtesy of the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution.

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Suggested Listening

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Resettlement Administration workers. Madras, Oregon, 1936. Photo by Arthur Rothstein.
Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, FSA_OWI Collection.

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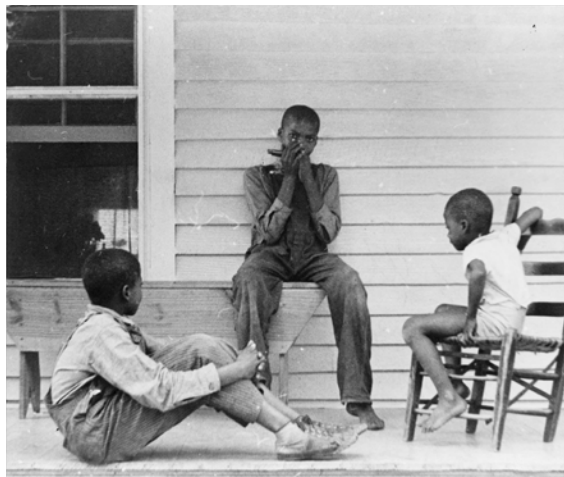
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Back cover photo: Charlie Sayles. Courtesy of the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution.



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CLASSIC HARMONICA BLUES

From SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS - Compiled and Annotated by Barry Lee Pearson and Jeff Place

In the 1850s, clockmaker Matthias Hohner began making harmonicas in Germany. By the turn of the century, his market expanded to America where among countless others, African Americans claimed the instrument as their own. *Classic Harmonica Blues from Smithsonian Folkways* brims with the creativity of soulful harmonica greats of the 20th century, including Sonny Terry, Doctor Ross, Eddie Burns, Jesse Fuller, Phil Wiggins, and more. Culled from the historic Folkways Records collection and live performances at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, these recordings take us to the heart of the classic American blues tradition. 66 minutes, 36-page booklet.

- 1. Theme Song** - Doctor Ross, The Harmonica Boss 2:54
- 2. Heart in Sorrow** - Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee 2:58
- 3. Take Your Fingers Off It** - Will Shade, Charlie Burse, and Gus Cannon 2:52
- 4. Nine Below Zero** - Eddie Burns 3:33
- 5. Bye Bye Bird** - Charlie Sayles 3:09
- 6. Gillum Blues** - Jazz Gillum 2:13
- 7. Crow Jane Blues** - Sonny Terry 1:58
- 8. Dog Days of August** - John Cephas and Phil Wiggins 4:09
- 9. Minglewood Blues** - John Sebastian and the J Band (with Annie Raines) 3:41
- 10. Good Morning Little School Girl** - Doctor Ross, the Harmonica Boss 3:36
- 11. Sweet Home Chicago** - Phil Wiggins and the Robert Johnson Tribute Band 4:15
- 12. One Way Out** - Eddie Burns 2:25
- 13. Boogie Baby** - Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee 2:30
- 14. Low Down Blues** - Neal Pattman 3:07
- 15. Hooka Tooka** - Chambers Brothers 2:25
- 16. Train Piece** - Charlie Sayles 5:07
- 17. Chicago Breakdown** - Doctor Ross, The Harmonica Boss 3:40
- 18. I Feel So Good** - Warner Williams and Jay Summerour 2:00
- 19. Barbara Allen Blues** - Roscoe Holcomb 1:26
- 20. Custard Pie** - Sonny Terry and unknown washboard band 2:48



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CLASSIC HARMONICA BLUES

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