



# CLASSIC PIEDMONT BLUES

from SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS



Smithsonian Folkways

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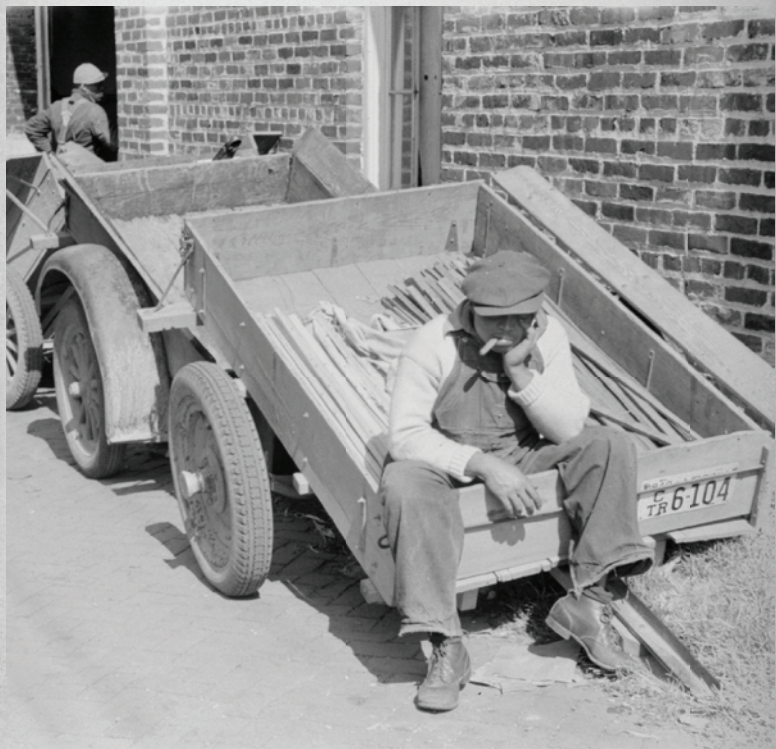
- 1. TRUCKIN' LITTLE BABY 3:00**  
**John Jackson**  
(Fulton Allen)
- 2. MAMIE 4:13**  
**John Cephas and Phil Wiggins**  
(Fulton Allen)
- 3. HEY BARTENDER, THERE'S  
A BIG BUG IN MY BEER 2:47**  
**Warner Williams and  
Eddie Pennington**  
(Vern Orr/EMI Unart Catalog, Inc., BMI)
- 4. CONFUSION 3:21**  
**Brownie McGhee and  
Sonny Terry**  
(Walter McGhee/Embassy Music Corp.  
o/b/o Maureen Music, BMI)
- 5. T.B. BLUES 3:24**  
**Josh White**  
(Victoria Spivey/Kobalt Music Publishing America  
o/b/o Edwin H. Morris & Co., BMI)
- 6. IF I COULD HOLLER LIKE  
A MOUNTAIN JACK 3:06**  
**Baby Tate**
- 7. CLOG DANCE 1:09**  
**Hobart Smith**
- 8. DAISY 3:27**  
**Brownie McGhee**  
(Walter McGhee/Songs of Universal, Inc.  
o/b/o Sugar Hill Music Publishing Ltd., BMI)
- 9. GOING DOWN THE ROAD  
FEELING BAD 2:13**  
**Elizabeth Cotten**
- 10. I GOT A WOMAN  
'CROSS TOWN 1:56**  
**Pink Anderson**  
(Ray Charles-Renald J. Richard/  
Unichappell Music Inc., BMI-Sony/  
ATV Songs LLC o/b/o Mijac Music, BMI)
- 11. RED RIVER BLUES 3:01**  
**John Jackson**





12. **I AIN'T GONNA PICK  
NO MORE COTTON 3:50**  
**Warner Williams and  
Jay Summerour**  
(Big Bill Broonzy)
13. **SWEET WOMAN 3:06**  
**Sonny Terry and  
Brownie McGhee**  
(Saunders Terrell)
14. **THE TRAIN THAT CARRIED  
MY GIRL FROM TOWN 2:22**  
**Doc Watson**  
(Arr. Arthel Lane Watson/Downtown DLJ Songs  
o/b/o Budde Music, Inc., BMI)
15. **MOUNTAIN JACK 3:31**  
**Reverend Gary Davis**  
(Arr. Gary Davis/Downtown DLJ Songs  
o/b/o Chandos Music Co., ASCAP)
16. **CROW JANE 3:04**  
**John Cephas and Phil Wiggins**
17. **FORE DAY CREEP 4:14**  
**Brownie McGhee**  
(Ida Cox/Universal -Songs of Polygram  
International, Inc., BMI)
18. **SITTIN' ON TOP OF  
THE WORLD 2:43**  
**Roscoe Holcomb**  
(Lonnie Chatmon -Walter Vinson/MPL Music Publishing,  
Inc. o/b/o Edwin H. Morris & Co., ASCAP)
19. **MEET ME IN THE BOTTOM 3:33**  
**Pink Anderson**  
(Buddy Moss/Wixen Music Publishing o/b/o  
Big Legal Mess Publishing, BMI)
20. **DIRTY MISTREATER 3:01**  
**Sonny Terry , Brownie McGhee,  
and J.C. Burris**  
(Saunders Terrell/Beechwood Music Corp., BMI)
21. **THE ROAD IS ROUGH  
AND ROCKY 3:24**  
**Archie Edwards**  
(Archie Edwards)





Farmers' trailers with tobacco sticks outside warehouse during auction sale. Danville, Virginia, 1940.  
Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott.

# CLASSIC PIEDMONT BLUES

FROM SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

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Barry Lee Pearson



**THE PIEDMONT** (“the foot of the mountain”) is a geographic region in the eastern United States stretching from the Appalachians to the Atlantic coastal plain and extending north to south through parts of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama. When it refers to an African American blues style, however, the Piedmont is more likely confined to the southern states from Virginia through the Carolinas into northern Georgia or, as some writers put it, from Richmond to Atlanta. One of three generally accepted blues regions—the Delta/Deep South and the Southwest (Texas and Oklahoma) being the other two—the Piedmont may also encompass artists from adjacent communities in the mountains of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. As a reflection of migration patterns, we also see the term used to describe blues in Maryland and the District of Columbia.

Since musical practices don't recognize state or geographical boundaries, and musicians move with the rest of the population, taking their musical practices with them, it's unproductive to apply the label too strictly. Instead, we should think of Piedmont blues as evolving in the Piedmont but then carried beyond the geographical Piedmont by musicians who mastered the style. You don't have to be born in the Piedmont to play in the Piedmont style. You can also learn it from other Piedmont blues practitioners or their recordings. For example, John Cephas—until his death in 2009, the Piedmont blues' primary spokesperson—was born and worked in Washington, D.C., but his family's roots are in



Bowling Green, Virginia, just north of Richmond, where he spent most of his life and learned to play blues. He considered the Piedmont tradition his heritage, connecting him to a broader tradition he shared with his cousin, who taught him to play, and the regional artists who influenced him. It was the local way people played blues or, as Cephas put it:

*That's the way the older guys from Virginia and North Carolina played, so that's the way I learned, from watching them and playing with them. That's the style that's characteristic of this area, and most of the musicians from around here could play in that style: guys like Willie Trice, Frank Hovington, Pernell Charity, the Foddrell Brothers, John Jackson, Archie Edwards, my cousin David.*

Cephas also learned from the recordings of the Piedmont's most prominent artists.

*I used to listen to records of Blind Boy Fuller, and patterned my style of playing on [him] and Reverend Gary Davis more so than any others. They had the most influence on me.*

Of the 17 featured artists on this compilation, nine were born in the geographic Piedmont. The others came from the mountains west of the Piedmont or urban centers east of the Piedmont that drew migrants from the geographic Piedmont. By state, Baby Tate and Sonny Terry were born in Georgia; Pink Anderson, Reverend Gary Davis, and Josh White in South Carolina; J.C. Burris, Elizabeth Cotten, and Doc Watson in North Carolina; Archie Edwards, John Jackson, and Hobart Smith in Virginia; Jay Summerour and Warner Williams in Maryland; Brownie McGhee in Tennessee; Roscoe Holcomb in Kentucky; and John Cephas and Phil Wiggins in the District of Columbia. Although they all have a particular story—how they learned, whom they listened to, where they played, and with whom they recorded—their musical styles have also been shaped by a shared regional history dating from the Civil War through the folk revival and represented on this recording.

Following the end of the Civil War, African Americans left farms and plantations in the South for southern cities, in the first wave of a population movement called the Great Migration. Many of the cities needed rebuilding, and newly freed black Americans provided the labor for such projects,



often under harsh conditions. Other blacks took advantage of the new freedom to travel, seeking out new surroundings and new, if limited, economic opportunities. In the Piedmont, Atlanta, Georgia; Spartanburg and Greenville, South Carolina; Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina; and Richmond, Virginia, all attracted substantial black populations, including musicians and the economic support necessary to maintain them. In the first two decades of the 20th century Spartanburg and Greenville supported a thriving string band tradition, whose practitioners included Pink Anderson, Reverend Gary Davis, Baby Tate, and Josh White. During the 1930s and 1940s the Raleigh-Durham region of North Carolina, which was already home base to Blind Boy Fuller and his manager, J.B. Long, attracted Sonny Terry from Georgia and Brownie McGhee from Knoxville, Tennessee. In the 1940s, the Washington, D.C., area drew John Jackson and Archie Edwards from Virginia and Elizabeth Cotten from North Carolina. Jackson worked as a chauffeur and later as a grave digger, while Cotten worked as a domestic helper. But more often African Americans found government jobs at the Federal or local level. For example, Phil Wiggins' father was in the military; so was Archie Edwards, who later worked for the District of Columbia. John Cephas worked for the D.C. National Guard, and Warner Williams drove a truck for the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Finally, with both its employment and recording opportunities, New York City lured Josh White in the 1930s, and Reverend Gary Davis, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and J.C. Burris in the 1940s.

Looking back to the beginning of the 20th century, evidence suggests that blues arrived in the Piedmont roughly ten years later than in Mississippi and Texas. Blues scholars have suggested various reasons for the delay, but the simplest answer is that the older, pre-blues styles continued to suit the recreational needs of the Piedmont's black communities. In contrast to other parts of the South where the evolving blues form quickly superseded and largely eradicated fiddle- and banjo-based dance music, in the Piedmont the transition was slower and never complete. Pre-blues string band dance music held on longer in the Piedmont, particularly in the rural agricultural communities and in the adjoining mountains. But what worked in rural farming communities was less suited to urban life.

Concurrent with the evolution of the blues, the guitar, an old instrument, was suddenly available to all strata of society thanks to mail order houses and rural farm delivery. Black families in the Piedmont as well as in the mountains could now afford a four-dollar guitar. Whereas John Jackson's and Warner Williams' fathers played guitar as well as fiddle and banjo, the next generation was a guitar generation. In addition, whereas the older generation played blues as one of many forms of dance music, the next generation, though they knew these other forms, chose to play blues first and foremost



as the then up-to-date soundtrack for their house parties and dances. Despite the scattered presence of piano and harmonica players, Piedmont blues evolved into a guitar-driven style, and the majority of Piedmont recording artists played guitar. Moreover, even when electric guitars became available, Piedmont blues has remained an acoustic tradition. It also employed a complex thumb and finger-picking style that, despite local and individual variations, has remained fairly consistent. For example, Archie Edwards, who was born in the Virginia Piedmont on the edge of the Appalachians, described his style as follows ("East Virginia" here refers to the state as a whole):

*I play what they call the old Piedmont style, but I call it East Virginia blues because that's where I learned it when I was growing up in the country. It's finger-picking, where you use your thumb and your fingers; that's the way the old timers played. Back in the old days if you wanted a little bass you had to do it with your thumb because they had nobody to play bass for you, or drums, either one.*

John Cephas, who lived some 150 miles to the east, offered a similar explanation:

*Phil [Wiggins] and I play in the Piedmont style, which is pretty much the style I learned when I was growing up. We stick with the acoustic sound, which is typical of the Piedmont blues players. My style is a little different from most modern blues players because I play with my thumb and fingers with an alternating thumb and finger style. I keep a constant bass line going with my thumb, and on the treble strings I pick out the melody or the words of the song I'm singing. And when you put them together, that's the Piedmont style.*

Depending on the skill of the artist, the overall sound was rich, full, melodic, and solid as a rock. It had its deep side, as exemplified by songs like "Mamie," but more often is characterized as dance music. There was a preference for 8-bar blues and ragtime chord progressions, allowing the guitarist to show off but also keeping the dancers on their feet. Cephas' partner Phil Wiggins stressed its dance functions:





*[T]he older generation of people weren't playing for people sitting on their butts and nodding their head to the rhythm of the music. [John] started out playing for people who were talking, laughing, arguing, eating, and, most importantly, dancing. The Piedmont guitar style has that beautiful syncopated rhythm that made people want to swing their hips and move their feet and have a good time. The Piedmont rhythm gives you so much energy it's fun to kind of make the harmonica dance to that rhythm.*

As to vocal style, the Piedmont tradition is quite diverse. Consider the gospel-tinged, preacherly vocals of John Cephas or the street-singer, declamatory approach of Pink Anderson. In contrast, Elizabeth Cotten, John Jackson, and Warner Williams are more understated. In Mississippi too, of course, one could contrast the intensity of Robert Johnson and Son House with the warmer, laid-back stylings of John Hurt or Bo Carter. Numerous factors, such as the song, the artist's intent, and the audience, affect how an artist chooses to sing any particular piece.

Regional factors—geographic, demographic, even agricultural—also shaped the evolution of the Piedmont sound. For example, with the exception of Georgia and parts of South Carolina, the Piedmont was far less dependent on cotton production than the Deep South or Texas. This meant that it did not have the black population density associated with cotton culture. Outside of the developing black cities, the rural black communities as recalled by John Jackson or John Cephas were more spread out, and community gatherings such as country dances were more integrated than in the Deep South. Black musicians played for both black and white events. As Jackson noted, his father, Suttie Jackson, was in great demand at both venues: “He used to play for square dances. That’s what he was doing for the white fellows, playing dances.” Warner Williams’ father played for both black and white dances before he switched exclusively to gospel. Virginia blues artist Archie Edwards remembered his white neighbors attending his father’s dances in order to pick up on the music. Although there was segregation and Jim Crow was in full swing, artists can claim music as one arena in which blacks and whites exchanged ideas. Beyond the rural dance scene, medicine show musicians like Pink Anderson had to perform songs from both black and white tradition to satisfy their mixed audiences. The same held true for street singers and semi-professional songsters chasing a dollar where and when they could draw a crowd.



Moreover, as the guitar became increasingly popular, white guitarists sought out black blues stylists to learn the latest blues techniques, and black guitar players learned the country music stylings of their white neighbors. What music one knew depended in part on where and with whom one grew up. As Warner Williams noted:

*The most music that I came up off, around here we called it, some people called it, hillbilly music. That's mostly what I come up with. I could play that better than I could blues because I was raised up with white people and that's all we sung.*

White adoption of the African American banjo is another example of the cross-cultural musical exchange that over time resulted in shared musical traditions. The three white artists featured on this compilation—Roscoe Holcomb, Hobart Smith, and Doc Watson—came from the mountains adjacent to the Piedmont, which exhibit a similar pattern of integrated musical practices. All three learned banjo before guitar, as did Archie Edwards' and John Jackson's fathers. While Watson switched to the use of a flat pick and concentrated on guitar, Holcomb and Smith remained banjo players, applying banjo-related techniques to their guitar playing. This connection between the banjo and the guitar can be heard in Piedmont artists' guitar work ranging from Atlanta's Barbecue Bob and Curley Weaver to Virginia's Archie Edwards and John Jackson.

The proliferation of phonograph recordings reinforced the give-and-take between musicians and interplay among styles. Williams learned blues primarily from recordings, as did Holcomb, Smith, and Watson. Black Piedmont artists were influenced by the recordings of The Carter Family, Uncle Dave Macon, and Jimmie Rodgers, who had already assimilated black blues traditions into their so-called country music styles. Or they listened to country music on the radio, because that's all the local stations broadcast. John Jackson learned from recordings by artists ranging from the Delmore Brothers to Tom T. Hall. John Cephas was partial to the work of guitar legend Merle Travis and even took steel guitar lessons from Buddy Charleton.

This color-blind approach, relatively common among musicians, unfortunately was not shared by the recording industry. Brownie McGhee noted that the record companies were reluctant to record blacks singing or playing country music, assuming the records would not sell. On the other hand, white country artists were consistently recorded playing blues and other styles deriving from black tradition.



During the golden age of on-site field recordings in the 1920s, the companies visiting the Piedmont paid far more attention to white string bands, many of whom were playing black music, even blues. The exception to this pattern was in Atlanta, Georgia, which also happened to have the Piedmont's largest black population. Race record companies returned to Atlanta time and again, often recording the same artists, including Peg Leg Howell, Willie McTell, Barbecue Bob, Curley Weaver, Charlie Lincoln, and Buddy Moss. While Atlanta remained a hotbed of recording activity from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, the rest of the Piedmont did not fare so well. The primary race record labels made visits to Charlotte, North Carolina; Columbia and Rock Hill, South Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; and Bristol and Knoxville, Tennessee, in the mountains, but recorded little black music, and even then it was more likely to be gospel. However, the lack of recording activity does not mean there was a lack of blues. As John Jackson put it:

*How can no [blues] come out of Virginia and nobody come looking for none? It was plenty bluesmen in Virginia around that area; up there would have been just as good as Mississippi John Hurt or anybody else.*

The oral testimony of Piedmont artists paints a picture of a thriving albeit under-the-radar blues tradition throughout the black Piedmont, but the recording industry either didn't know where to look for it or didn't care.

If the record companies weren't coming to the Piedmont, except Atlanta, Piedmont artists had to go to the record companies, which usually meant New York City. Josh White began recording in New York in 1932 and continued to record there for almost 30 years. In 1935 Blind Boy Fuller's manager J.B. Long drove John Cephas' heroes, Fuller and Reverend Gary Davis, to New York, beginning a six-year run in which Fuller recorded an astonishing 135 titles, most of them in New York. It's difficult to overestimate Fuller's impact on the Piedmont tradition. While other artists such as Buddy Moss had recording success, Fuller's songs and style can be heard in the repertoires of artists throughout the Piedmont, including the artists on this CD. Davis, Sonny Terry, and Baby Tate played with him in the Carolinas; Brownie McGhee briefly adopted his musical personality, recording as Blind Boy Fuller No. 2, even using Fuller's guitar, and went on to record versions of Fuller's songs, as did John Cephas, John Jackson, and Warner Williams.



Although Fuller remained in North Carolina until his death in 1941, his former partners Davis and Terry along with McGhee followed the lead Josh White had taken in the 1930s by moving to New York City. There Davis eked out a living singing gospel on the streets of Harlem. Terry and McGhee also struggled through the war years working solo, as a duo, or in various band formats; then their careers took a turn. In 1941 they were still recording with Fuller's label, but in 1942 they were recording for the Library of Congress and, under the patronage of John Hammond and Alan Lomax, joined Josh White and Lead Belly as the initial blues component of what would later be called the folk revival.

New York City continued to attract Piedmont blues artists through the 1950s and 1960s, including Buster Brown from Georgia, and Tarheel Slim and Wilbert Harrison from North Carolina, all of whom recorded for Bobby Robinson's Fury and Fire labels. Robinson, although a Piedmont native from South Carolina, broke with the Piedmont acoustic tradition by using an electric band format similar to the Chicago blues sound popularized by Chicago's Chess Records. Other New York labels drew on the gospel tradition of Virginia and the Carolinas. These artists applied their gospel vocal group skills to a new form of rhythm and blues now called doo-wop.

Brownie McGhee had several minor hits in the 1940s, but after World War II black musical tastes were rapidly changing, and New York's black rhythm and blues audience found Terry and McGhee's Piedmont sound too country and too old-fashioned. However, as the folk revival gained ground, a new, primarily white audience evolved that found the Piedmont sound just right. The revival also spurred new recording opportunities—including the advent of Folkways Records. Terry first recorded for Asch in 1944 and McGhee a year later. Less driven to make hit records, Folkways allowed artists greater latitude in choosing what and with whom they recorded. Although Folkways never did pay very much, the label provided a needed paycheck when times were hard. Moreover, it was savvy to the folk revival consumers, catering to their aesthetic preferences and sharing, if not shaping, their politics. And significantly, Folkways did not tie their artists to the label with exclusive contracts, which allowed Terry and McGhee to simultaneously work the black rhythm and blues market and the white folk revival market. These two maintained a dual R&B/folk persona for 15 years before going on to international acclaim as the standard-bearers of the Piedmont tradition, a position they held until their breakup in 1975.

The folk revival and its later counterpart, the blues revival, had an impact in Washington, D.C., where they set in motion a series of events resulting in the discovery of a new group of Piedmont artists. In 1963 two Washington-area blues researchers located Mississippi John Hurt in Mississippi, brought



him to Washington, and helped launch his remarkable run as a folk revival icon. His presence in the D.C. area also contributed to the discovery of Archie Edwards and John Jackson.

In 1963, Edwards read in the newspaper that his childhood hero John Hurt was playing at a local club. They soon became friends, and Hurt inspired Edwards to begin performing in public. In 1964, folklorist Chuck Perdue chanced upon John Jackson playing his guitar at a Fairfax, Virginia, gas station. Recognizing his importance as a traditional artist, Purdue took him to see John Hurt at a local club; there Jackson met Chris Strachwitz, who recorded him on his Arhoolie Record label.

In like circumstances, John Cephas encountered Alabama-born piano player Wilbert "Big Chief" Ellis, who had been part of the New York blues scene since 1937, recording on his own and with Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Stick McGhee, and Tarheel Slim. Ellis had recently moved to Washington, D.C., and was looking to form a new band to take advantage of his connections on the festival circuit. The two teamed up, adding Phil Wiggins to form the Barrelhouse Rockers in 1976. When Ellis died the following year, Cephas and Wiggins continued as a duo to carry the Piedmont torch for almost three decades.

Lastly, in the 1980s, Warner Williams and Jay Summerour emerged from the obscurity of the house party and beer garden circuit to make appearances at major venues like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and the National Folk Festival, and to record for Smithsonian Folkways and the Patuxent label. Local legends for over a dozen years, they now performed for a national audience. This critical mass of Washington-area artists shifted the center of the Piedmont tradition south again, from New York City to Washington, D.C. As they had throughout the century, economics and demographics influenced the transition, but Washington also provided a network of institutional support generated by the folk revival, government support for the traditional arts, and a more politicized vision of blues as cultural heritage. Caught up in that atmosphere, musicians could use the festival format to promote their regional style to a larger audience. As John Cephas put it:

*Not too many people have heard about Piedmont players unless it's Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, so I guess it's up to us to expose them to our type of music. That's why I like to play festivals, because the crowds are larger and you can play for more people.*

Artists like Jackson, Cephas, and Wiggins recorded extensively and toured the world, taking Piedmont blues to new audiences. Along with Archie Edwards, they also adopted a philosophy underscoring the



importance of passing the Piedmont style on to the next generation. Edwards expressed this proactive attitude toward tradition as something to be passed forward:

*I'm trying to keep the blues, what you call black heritage, I'm trying to keep it rolling. Yeah, and it doesn't matter who I teach it to because Mississippi John Hurt asked me, he said, "Brother Arch, whatever you do, teach my music to other people." He said, "Don't make no difference what color they are, teach it to them, because I don't want to die and you don't want to die. Teach them my music and teach them your music."*

When Hurt passed away in 1966, Edwards followed his instruction, and by the time of his own death in 1998 he had mentored a remarkable cadre of students in the relaxed, egalitarian atmosphere of his barbershop. One of his protégés, Michael Baytop, who formed the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation, respected Archie's wish. "Archie always said, 'It's like a relay race; you carry it as long as you can and then you pass the baton on.'" Baytop's other mentor, John Cephas, shared their vision:

*I think my type of music will always have its place. It may be that the older people who played that type of blues will fade away, but the music won't die as long as someone picks it up and learns it.*

Cephas ensured the tradition's vitality by teaching dozens of musicians, both black and white, until his death in 2009. At the present date, Phil Wiggins continues the mission, and, judging by the skill and dedication of the artists Edwards, Jackson, and Cephas inspired and mentored, Piedmont blues appears to be in good hands.





Tobacco field. Shoofly, North Carolina, 1939. Photograph by Dorothea Lange.

# SONGS

I am indebted to Bob Eagle and Eric S. LeBlanc's *Blues: A Regional Experience* for birth and death information, and to Bruce Bastin's *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* for a general history of the region. All quotations come from my own collection of interviews.



Farmers preparing their tobacco for auction. Durham, North Carolina, 1939. Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott.



## 1 TRUCKIN' LITTLE BABY

**John Jackson**, guitar and vocal

From *John Jackson: Rappahannock Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40181

Born in Woodville, Virginia, John Jackson (1924–2002) grew up in the Fort Valley, Rappahannock County, Virginia. He learned to play guitar and banjo from his father, Suttie, and other members of a highly musical extended family, but he was particularly inspired by a convict named Happy who worked as a trusty on a local road gang. Jackson played local parties until a fight in 1946 led him to give up playing in public. In 1949 he and his wife Cora moved to Fairfax Station, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. In 1964 folklorist Chuck Perdue brought him to the attention of Chris Strachwitz, who recorded him for his Arhoolie label. Through the 1960s and until his death, he toured and recorded extensively and was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1986.

Jackson's parents acquired a substantial record collection and he drew from the songs of artists such as Jim Jackson and Mississippi John Hurt, but he claimed his primary influences were Blind Boy Fuller and Blind Blake, two of the Piedmont's most influential stylists. "Trucking" was a popular African American dance, and Fuller recorded "Truckin' My Blues Away" in 1936 and "Truckin' My Blues Away No. 2" the following year. This is John's version of Fuller's 1938 Columbia recording "She a Truckin' Little Baby."

## 2 MAMIE

**John Cephas**, guitar and vocal; **Phil Wiggins**, harmonica

From *Cephas and Wiggins: Richmond Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40179

John Cephas (1930–2009) was born in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, D.C., but his family's roots can be found in Bowling Green, Virginia. His musical education began in church and at family social events. His grandfather John Dudley, his aunt Lillian Douglas, and his cousin David Talliaferro all played guitar and served as inspiration and mentors. His grandfather also introduced him to the house party circuit in rural Virginia, Washington, D.C., and the local region; these were his primary performance venues, though he also dabbled in gospel quartet singing. Following a stint in the Army, where he served in Korea in the early 1950s, he worked as a carpenter for the D.C. National Guard and stopped playing. A chance meeting with piano player Big Chief Ellis in 1976 sparked a



renewed interest in performing. That same year he met 22-year-old harmonica player Phil Wiggins, and the three formed the Barrelhouse Rockers, working small clubs and festivals. After Chief's death in 1977, Cephas and Wiggins continued on as a guitar/harmonica duo, and for the next 30 years toured the world while recording for the Flying Fish, Rounder, Alligator, and Smithsonian Folkways labels. In 1989 Cephas was named a National Heritage Fellow. (For biographical information on Wiggins, see track 16.)

"Mamie" comes from Blind Boy Fuller's 1937 ARC recording. Evidence suggests that the song may have been in tradition earlier, but Fuller had a gift for picking up and refurbishing traditional tunes. A soulful statement of love and loss, it represents the deeper side of the Piedmont tradition, proving a perfect vehicle for Cephas' gospel-tinged vocal. A 12-bar blues in the key of A, this version is taken from Cephas' last recording session on October 7 and 8, 2007.

### **3 HEY BARTENDER, THERE'S A BIG BUG IN MY BEER** **Warner Williams, guitar and vocal; Eddie Pennington, guitar**

*From Blues Highway: Warner Williams Live with Jay Summerour, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40120*

Born in Takoma Park, Maryland, in 1930, Warner Williams learned guitar from his father, who also taught Williams' brothers and sisters; music was a family affair, with the older siblings teaching the younger. Williams and his brothers played storefronts and street corners in Takoma Park, and as he grew older he expanded these venues to "house hops," fish fries, beer gardens, and church events, carrying his guitar with him constantly. At age 22 he won first prize on a Washington, D.C., radio show playing a version of Ernest Tubbs' 1941 hit, "Walking the Floor Over You," a song he still performs today. Like many other Piedmont artists, Williams learned from phonograph recordings of both blues and country artists. A true songster, Williams plays a seemingly endless repertoire of blues, country, gospel, rhythm and blues, and pop standards but admits to a preference for older songs. According to folklorist Nick Spitzer, this song was based on Merrill Moore's 1952 recording "Big Bug Boogie," written by Vern Orr. Williams claims he heard it on the radio but changed the words to suit his own imagination. This particular version was recorded live at a 1990s "Folk Masters" concert at Wolf Trap in Vienna, Virginia, where Williams paired with Eddie Pennington, a thumb-style guitarist from Princeton, Kentucky. Both artists were named National Heritage Fellows, Williams in 2011, and Pennington 10 years earlier.



## 4 CONFUSION

**Brownie McGhee**, guitar and vocal; **Sonny Terry**, harmonica and vocal;  
**Gene Moore**, drums

From *Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40011

Born Saunders Terrell (1911–1986) in Greensboro, Georgia, Sonny Terry learned harmonica from his father, Reuben Terrell. After losing his sight he began to perform as a street musician in the Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, area and eventually teamed up with guitarist Blind Boy Fuller, with whom he recorded from 1937 to 1940. In 1938 he appeared in John Hammond's "From Spirituals to Swing" concert in New York City. Following Fuller's death he relocated to New York City, where he teamed up with guitarist Brownie McGhee. (For biographical information on McGhee, see track 8.)

The duet recorded extensively for Folkways and various rhythm and blues labels. Terry also appeared in several Broadway productions, including *Finian's Rainbow* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Although they eventually became estranged in 1975, their 35-year partnership earned them National Heritage Fellowships in 1982. The song "Confusion" appears to be their own composition and is more in line with their rhythm and blues material. They recorded a "Confusion Blues" for New York City's Alert label in 1946, as well as a "Confused" for Savoy in 1948 and a "Confusing" for Ace in 1956–1957. This version comes from a 1958 Folkways album.

## 5 T.B. BLUES

**Josh White**, guitar and vocal

From *Josh White: Free and Equal Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40081

Joshua White (1914–1969) was born in Greenville, South Carolina, where as a child he was lead boy for several blind blues and gospel singers. He began his prolific recording career in 1929 as guitarist for a white country string band called the Carver Boys. By 1932 he was recording for ARC and subsidiaries, producing both blues and gospel as Joshua White, Pinewood Tom, and Joshua White, The Singing Christian.

He had several hits, including "Blood Red River," over the next eight years. After moving to New York in the early 1930s, he slowly shifted away from down home blues and gospel to more of a



nightclub act. By 1940–1941 he was working with Alan Lomax on radio and in concerts, and performing at the Village Vanguard with Lead Belly. He also appeared in theatrical productions. At the same time he recorded rhythm and blues, scoring a hit for Decca with “Jelly, Jelly” in 1944. That year he also recorded this version of “T.B. Blues” for the Asch label (which would become Folkways). Turning more and more to political commentary and folk songs from around the world, he became a major figure in the folk revival from its earliest days through the 1960s. A handsome, charismatic performer, he had roles in several films, but his political repertoire caught the attention of the 1950s HUAC Red Scare, limiting his opportunities.

T.B., or tuberculosis, was likewise the subject of country legend Jimmie Rodgers’ autobiographical lament, “T.B. Blues.” However, White’s version comes from the 1927 Okeh recording by Victoria Spivey, who also recorded “Dirty T.B. Blues” (1929) and “T.B.’s Got Me” (1938). Lead Belly recorded it several times as well in 1940 for Bluebird and the Library of Congress. The song entered tradition in the Southeast and was recorded by Piedmont artist Buddy Moss for Banner in 1933 as “T.B.’s Killing Me.”

## 6 IF I COULD HOLLER LIKE A MOUNTAIN JACK

**Baby Tate**, guitar and vocal

From *The Blues—Music from The Documentary Film: By Sam Charters*, FWASCH 101

Born in Elberton, Georgia, Charles Henry “Baby” Tate (1916–1972) moved to Greenville, South Carolina, when he was ten. A self-taught guitarist, he fell under the influence of local string band guitar players Willie Walker and Reverend Gary Davis, but his primary influence was the ubiquitous Blind Boy Fuller, who was plying his musical trade in the Greenville area at the time. Tate appeared on local radio with a group called the Carolina Blackbirds in the 1930s. Following a stint in the Army in North Africa and Europe (1942–1946), he recorded for the Kapp label in the 1950s. Moving to Spartanburg, South Carolina, in the early 1950s, he often teamed up with Pink Anderson, with whom he recorded for Bluesville and Folkways in 1961; Tate recorded this cut in Spartanburg c. 1961–1962. “If I Could Holler (Like a Mountain Jack)” dates back to a 1926 Ma Rainey Paramount recording, “Mountain Jack Blues,” credited to Sid Harris. The song, the verse, and the line, however, are all deeply traditional in the Piedmont and beyond, and were probably in tradition earlier than 1926. Tate’s version is much in



the style of Fuller and fellow Greenville artist Reverend Gary Davis, who recorded it as an instrumental simply titled “Mountain Jack” (see track 15).

## 7 CLOG DANCE

Hobart Smith, guitar and dance

From *Hobart Smith: In Sacred Trust: The 1963 Fleming Brown Tapes*,  
Smithsonian Folkways CD 40141

Hobart Smith (1897–1965) was born in Smyth County, Virginia. His mother and father both played banjo; he began on banjo at age seven and later mastered fiddle, guitar, harmonica, and accordion. He was a talented dancer as well. For years he played banjo songs, gospel hymns, country music, pop, and blues at community functions ranging from square dances to church events in and around Saltville, Virginia. According to his biographer, Stephen Wade, he moved on to medicine shows and radio work and finally to the folk festival circuit; there he and his ballad-singing sister, Texas Gladden, caught the attention of folklorists including Alan Lomax, leading to recordings and folk revival renown. In 1963 Smith visited Chicago, where he appeared at several concerts and on local television. He stayed at banjo player Fleming Brown’s home, where Brown tape-recorded hours of his seemingly inexhaustible repertoire. These tapes were passed on to banjo player, writer, and actor Stephen Wade, who was the prime mover in their later Smithsonian Folkways publication.

Although often considered a novelty act, dancing to one’s own instrumental accompaniment is not that uncommon among blues, medicine show, and country musicians. The combination of these two complementary skill sets creates an exciting performance, as demonstrated by artists such as Robert Johnson, Algia Mae Hinton, Grandpa Jones, and John Hartford. Still other performers used exaggerated or complicated footwork while seated, adding rhythmic texture to their songs. They included Uncle Dave Macon, John Lee Hooker, Lightning Hopkins—who used bottle caps on his shoes—and Champion Jack Dupree. (See Jack Dupree’s “Clog Dance (Stomping Blues)” on *Classic Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40134.)



## 8

**DAISY****Brownie McGhee**, guitar and vocal*From Brownie McGhee: The Folkways Years, 1945–1959*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40034

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Walter Brown McGhee (1915–1996) was first influenced by his father, Duff McGhee, and learned guitar as a young boy. During the 1930s he worked with a gospel quartet and in the late 1930s met Blind Boy Fuller and his agent J.B. Long in Durham, North Carolina. In 1940 he recorded for the Okeh label and, following Fuller's death in 1941, recorded as Blind Boy Fuller No. 2, releasing "The Death of Blind Boy Fuller." As McGhee put it: "I started recording for everybody using different names: Blind Boy Fuller No. 2 was on Columbia. I was Henry Johnson on Decca and Spider Sam on Atlantic, and was Tennessee Gabriel on Circle." We could also add Brother George and Blind Boy Williams to his list of recording aliases. In the early 1940s he moved to New York, where he teamed up with harmonica player Sonny Terry; they worked together until the mid-1970s, recording for dozens of labels including Solo, Savoy, Stinson, Alert, Capitol, Disc, Derby, Elektra, and Smash. McGhee first recorded for Asch in 1944 and enjoyed a 14-year run with Folkways.

His earliest recording of "Daisy" was "I'm Callin' Daisy," the fourth song in his very first 1940 Okeh session; then he recorded it again for Red Robin in 1952–1953. According to folklorist Kip Lornell, this particular version was recorded live in Chicago on a Studs Terkel radio program that also featured Sonny Terry and Big Bill Broonzy, and was initially issued on Folkways 3817 in 1957.

## 9

**GOING DOWN THE ROAD FEELING BAD****Elizabeth Cotten**, guitar and vocal*From Elizabeth Cotten: Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40009

Born near Chapel Hill, North Carolina (1895–1987), Libba, as she was called, learned to play her brother's guitar at the age of eight or nine. Essentially self-taught, she played the instrument upside down and left-handed, developing her own version of the southeastern thumb/bass/two-finger-picking style. In the 1940s she moved to Washington, D.C., where she found work as a domestic in the home of the Seeger family: ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, his wife Ruth, and children Pete, Mike,



and Peggy. Fieldworker, musician, and Folkways recording artist Mike Seeger first recorded her for Folkways' *Elizabeth Cotten: Folksongs and Instrumentals with Guitar* in 1953. Two more Folkways albums followed, helping launch a late-life performing career lasting into her 90s. A major artist during the folk revival, she was a favorite among the Washington, D.C., folk song community. Aspiring finger pickers copied her most popular composition, "Freight Train," for decades. She was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1984, and her recording *Elizabeth Cotten – Live!* (Arhoolie) won a GRAMMY in 1985.

Like many Piedmont women guitarists she favored instrumentals, but her laid-back, warm vocals served her well. The song "Going Down the Road Feeling Bad" is deeply traditional in the Southeast, equally popular among black and white artists and known by various titles: "I Ain't Gonna Be Treated This Way," "I'm Going Where the Chilly Winds Don't Blow," and "Lonesome Road Blues," the title under which it was first recorded by Henry Whittier on Okeh in 1923. It used an older blues form, repeating the first line three times followed by a rhyming line. (For another version see *Cephas and Wiggins: Richmond Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40179.)

## 10 I GOT A WOMAN 'CROSS TOWN Pink Anderson, guitar and vocal

From *Pink Anderson: Carolina Medicine Show Hokum and Blues with Baby Tate*, Folkways 3588

Born in Laurens, South Carolina, Pinkney Anderson (1900–1974) learned guitar at age ten. As a teen he joined W.R. Kerr's Medicine Show and remained with them until 1945. Along with his partner, Simmie Dooley, he recorded for Columbia in 1928. He continued on the medicine show circuit through 1958 and was discovered by Folkways recording artist Paul Clayton in 1950 playing at a county fair in Virginia. Back in the studio after 22 years, he recorded for Riverside, Bluesville, and Folkways. The ultimate songster, Anderson performed everything from minstrel era hits to country music standards.

Here we find him equally at ease with Ray Charles' 1954 megahit, "I've Got a Woman," which Folkways titled "I Got a Woman 'Cross Town." A converted version of the gospel song "My Jesus Is All the World to Me," the song created a sensation for being sacrilegious, but by the time Anderson recorded his Folkways version in 1961, the initial scandal had died down and the piece was a rhythm and blues/rock and roll classic. (For another version testifying to the song's popularity among southeastern blues players, see Marvin and Turner Foddrell's "I Got a Woman," *Classic Appalachian Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40198.)



## 11

## RED RIVER BLUES

**John Jackson**, guitar and vocal

From *John Jackson: Rappahannock Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40181

For biographical information on John Jackson, see track 1.

Southeastern U.S. musicians know this traditional song by various names. Josh White recorded it as “Blood Red River,” Blind Boy Fuller as “Bye-Bye Baby Blues” in 1937, and Brownie McGhee as “Rising Sun” in 1955. A typical 8-bar blues, a form very much admired by southeastern artists, it allows for elaborate finger picking particularly in the key of A. However, it also leaves less room for the instrumental response component typically found in the 12-bar structure. “Red River Blues” could be considered the all-time anthem of the Piedmont tradition. It’s no surprise that the region’s most comprehensive researcher, Bruce Bastin, titled his 1986 book *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*.

John Jackson recorded the song several times for Arhoolie, but this version comes from a live performance at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on June 29, 1975.

## 12

## I AIN’T GONNA PICK NO MORE COTTON

**Warner Williams**, guitar and vocal; **Jay Summerour**, harmonica

From *Blues Highway: Warner Williams Live with Jay Summerour*,  
Smithsonian Folkways CD 40120

Representing the Piedmont guitar/harmonica duet tradition, Warner Williams and Jay Summerour have been working Maryland house parties, fish fries, and festivals for close to 30 years. They first recorded for Folkways in the late 1990s and for Patuxent in 2007.

Jay Summerour was born in 1950 in Rockville, Maryland. At age seven he got his first harmonica and, inspired by his grandfather, Smack Martin, who played both harmonica and guitar, he learned how to play. He was also influenced by Sonny Terry, whom he met as a young man and discovered was a distant relative. After working with several blues and rock groups, he teamed up with Williams in a duet format. (For biographical information on Williams, see track 3.)





"I Ain't Gonna Pick No More Cotton" could be read as a tongue-in-cheek protest song with the lines, "If a mule ran away with the world I'll tell him to go ahead on," or "I wouldn't say get up if a mule was sitting in my lap," and is typical of blues humor. This song derives from Big Bill Broonzy's 1940 Vocalion recording, "Plow Hand Blues." It has been redone by several of Broonzy's Chicago colleagues including Homesick James Williamson, who recorded "Farmer's Blues" for Chance in 1952, and John Henry Barbee, who recorded "I Ain't Gonna Pick No More Cotton" for Storyville in 1964. Both Williamson and Barbee were from Tennessee, moving to Chicago in 1930 and 1938 respectively.



L to R: John Jackson, Snooky Pryor, Phil Wiggins, John Cephas, and Henry Townsend. In the background is Homesick James Williamson (in vest) and author. Photograph by Jim Alexander.



Archie Edwards. Photograph by Lisa Falk.

## 13 SWEET WOMAN

**Sonny Terry**, harmonica and vocal; **Brownie McGhee**, guitar

From *Sonny Terry: The Folkways Years 1944–1963*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40033

For biographical information on Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, see tracks 4 and 8, respectively.

This particular track was discovered in Moses Asch's Folkways office on an acetate disc with the initials ST and BM written on the label. A version of the song was issued on the short-lived, obscure Solo label, and this may have been an alternate take. (As similar acetates have since been found, Smithsonian archivist Jeff Place speculates that Asch may have been recording blues for Solo or letting Solo use the studio. Whatever the case, Asch and Folkways inherited the sides.) The recording may also have been the duo's initial venture for Asch on Folkways. Although they recorded for many other labels—R&B, folk, and documentary—they returned to Folkways time and again as they became more and more entrenched in the folk and then blues revival of the 1960s and 1970s.

## 14 THE TRAIN THAT CARRIED MY GIRL FROM TOWN

**Doc Watson**, guitar and vocal

From *The Doc Watson Family*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40012

Arthel “Doc” Watson (1923–2012) was born in Stoney Fork Township (later known as Deep Gap), North Carolina. Blind from birth, he grew up hearing traditional ballads and hymns around the house. As a youngster he was further exposed to the country music of Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family via 78 rpm recordings. After learning harmonica and banjo, he picked up guitar at age twelve. He and his brother Linney formed a duet and performed locally. He continued to work with various local groups developing his remarkable flat picking skills, which he applied to roots music styles running the gamut from fiddle tunes to the latest rockabilly hits. In 1960 folklorist Ralph Rinzler encountered him when he went to record Clarence Ashley and introduced him to the folk revival audience. Doc worked concerts and festivals with his son Merle, recording for Folkways, Vanguard, Flying Fish, and Sugar Hill, and was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1988.



This piece derives from West Virginia's Frank Hutchison's 1927 Okeh release, "The Train That Carried the Girl from Town." An idiosyncratic guitarist, Hutchison performed the piece with a knife or bottleneck-slide style, and it became a staple of white, mountain blues. Most likely derived from African American tradition, the song employs a typical blues motif of blaming a train for stealing one's lover. The song has also been collected in black Virginia tradition. Franklin County musician Roy Edwards played it, as did his son Archie Edwards, both learning it from the Hutchison recording. Archie Edwards claimed he always thought that Hutchison was black until he saw a photo of him. Hutchison characteristically played the song at a faster tempo than was common among black artists. Watson does him one better, playing the song at a breakneck pace. In fact, it's so fast that Doc truncates Hutchison's phrase "Hey, Lord, I hate that train that carried my girl from town" to "Hey, that train that carried my girl from town."

## 15 MOUNTAIN JACK

**Reverend Gary Davis, guitar**

*From Reverend Gary Davis: Pure Religion and Bad Company, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40035*

Born in Laurens, South Carolina, Davis (1896–1972) learned harmonica, banjo, and guitar as a youngster. He claimed he first heard blues in 1910 when he was in Greenville working with Willie Walker's string band. In the early 1920s he relocated to North Carolina and by 1926 was in Durham. He spent a number of years as a singing preacher before teaming up with Blind Boy Fuller. In 1935 Fuller's manager, J.B. Long, took Davis to New York, where he recorded several blues and a number of gospel sides. Around 1943 he moved to New York, becoming a minister and street singer. He also reunited with his Durham cronies Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and in 1945 recorded two songs for the Asch label. From the late 1950s through the 1960s and up to 1971 he was a key figure in the New York folk music scene, playing coffeehouses, clubs, and recording for Riverside, Folkways, and Stinson. A brilliant guitarist with a declamatory preacher's voice coarsened by years of street singing, he primarily played and sang religious songs. However, in his later years as a guitar teacher he returned to some of the songster material of his string band days and, on occasion, the blues he played with Fuller.

The song "Mountain Jack" is a rare instrumental take on a traditional blues: "If I could holler like a mountain jack, I'd go up on the mountain call my baby back." As a floating verse the line shows up



in many songs, including Leroy Carr's 1928 "How Long — How Long Blues." John Cephas also uses it in his version of Blind Boy Fuller's 1940 "Little Woman You're So Sweet."

## 16 CROW JANE

**John Cephas**, guitar and vocal; **Phil Wiggins**, harmonica

From *Cephas and Wiggins: Richmond Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40179

Self-taught harmonica player Phil Wiggins (1954–) was born in Washington, D.C. In high school he began listening to recordings of Sonny Terry, Little Walter, and both Sonny Boy Williamsons. He often jammed with local musicians including Flora Molton, a gospel singer and guitarist from Louisa County, Virginia. Early on he also became involved with Washington, D.C.'s Smithsonian Folklife Festival, meeting and playing with various blues artists including Johnny Shines and John Cephas. Working with Cephas over the next 33 years, Wiggins earned a reputation as the finest harmonica player in the Piedmont style. Since Cephas' death in 2009, Wiggins has worked with various artists including Corey Harris and Reverend John Wilkins and currently fronts Phil Wiggins and the Chesapeake Sheiks.

"Crow Jane" is a traditional Piedmont standard first recorded by Charlotte, North Carolina's Julius Daniels for Victor in 1927. Carl Martin of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, also recorded it for Victor subsidiary Bluebird in 1934; Cephas learned it from Martin on the festival circuit. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee also recorded "Crow Jane Blues" for Capitol in 1947 and for Folkways as "Crow Jane" in 1958 (see Folkways 3821). "Crow Jane" is an idiomatic, unflattering term for a black woman, and shows up in several blues songs including Ida Cox's 1928 "Crow Jane Woman." Another 8-bar blues, it alternates between threats, insults, and praise typical of the woofing between men and women at the core of the blues tradition.



John and Cora Jackson. Photograph by Kathy Pfeffer.



## 17 FORE DAY CREEP

**Brownie McGhee**, guitar and vocal

From *Brownie McGhee: The Folkways Years 1945–1959*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40034

For biographical information on McGhee, see track 8.

“Fore Day Creep” comes from Ida Cox’s 1927 Paramount recording of the same title. Cox, born in Toccoa, Georgia, reprised the song for Vocalion in 1939 and released it as “Four Day Creep”; she reprised it yet again with the latter title later in the year in John Hammond’s “From Spirituals to Swing” concert in New York City. Several years later McGhee moved to New York City and either learned the tune from one of Cox’s recordings or from Cox herself, who frequently came to New York in her heavy touring schedule. In 1949 she moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, which happened to be where McGhee was born. McGhee’s partner, Sonny Terry, was also in the 1939 Hammond concert.

McGhee’s version is the same as Ida Cox’s except that she sang about her man and he sang about his woman, and he returned it to its original title. In African American blues poetry, “fore day,” sometimes rendered “fo day” in dialect, is yet another descriptive term for the wee hours, as in “early in the morning” or “soon one morning.” These terms have special resonance in the blues idiom as a time for sexual activity or, in the case of this song, suspected infidelity. Whether “fore” was changed to “four” due to a puritanical impulse or simply to correct a perceived spelling error is anybody’s guess. Certainly a “four day creep” would imply an infidelity of much longer duration. In this version, recorded in 1959, we see a vaudeville blues standard reworked into traditional southeastern Piedmont style.

## 18 SITTIN’ ON TOP OF THE WORLD

**Roscoe Holcomb**, banjo and vocal

From *Roscoe Holcomb: An Untamed Sense of Control*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40144

Roscoe Holcomb (1913–1982) was born in Daisy, Kentucky, near Hazard. A masterful though idiosyncratic guitar, banjo, and harmonica player, he is best known for his voice, which merges white, mountain blues and Primitive Baptist hymn singing to achieve an effect characterized as “the high lonesome sound.” The intensity of his vocals has earned him admirers from Bob Dylan to Eric Clapton.



At age ten Holcomb began playing banjo, and he eventually found jobs playing local dances. After putting dance music aside for a brief period when he first got married, he took it up again and continued to play for the rest of his life. Despite his skill and passion, music was never his full-time occupation; he always worked a day job. Equally at home with church music and dance music, he was first documented by folklorist, filmmaker, and musician John Cohen. He first recorded in 1959, and his 1965 release “High Lonesome Sound” earned a GRAMMY nomination. Through the 1960s and 1970s he appeared at festivals and concerts—a folk revival icon and the epitome of the unadorned mountain sound—and was featured on four Folkways albums.

“Sittin’ on Top of the World” was first recorded by the Mississippi Sheiks for Okeh in 1930 and was probably written by Walter Vinson (or Vincson). A hit for the Sheiks, it spawned a “Sitting on Top of the World” number two within the same year, and covers by various blues, country, and pop artists. Sonny Terry recorded a 1952 version on Jax titled “I Don’t Worry (Sitting on Top of the World).” A standard in most genres of American roots music including bluegrass, western swing, blues, and rock, it’s been recorded by Bob Wills, Howlin’ Wolf, Ray Charles, The Grateful Dead, Cream, and Jack White. While Holcomb’s version, recorded in New York City in 1964, is sung with his trademark intensity and veers toward becoming a narrative, in black tradition the piece is wistful and ironic and sometimes similar to a work song.

## 19 MEET ME IN THE BOTTOM

**Pink Anderson**, guitar and vocal

From *Pink Anderson: Carolina Medicine Show Hokum and Blues with Baby Tate*, Folkways 3588

For biographical information on Anderson, see track 10.

“Meet Me in the Bottom” under various titles is yet another widely recorded blues song. Atlanta’s Buddy Moss recorded it as “Oh Lordy Mama” for Banner in 1934, using the line “Meet me at the river, you can bring my shoes and clothes.” It did well enough to generate the follow-up “Oh Lordy Mama No. 2” for ARC in 1935. It may have been well known to Atlanta musicians. Moss’ sometime-partner Curley (or Corley) Weaver recorded an unissued take for ARC even earlier, in 1933. “Bumblebee Slim,” born Amos Easton in Brunswick, Georgia, recorded his version, “Hey Lordy Mama,” for Decca in Chicago in



1935 and again in 1936 as “Meet Me in the Bottom (Hey Lawdy Mama).” He too had ties to Atlanta. Blind Boy Fuller called his 1937 ARC version “Boots and Shoes”; Sonny Terry recorded it for the Library of Congress as “Meet Me on the Railroad and Bring My Shoes and Clothes” in 1933; and Howlin’ Wolf reprised it as “Down in the Bottom” for Cadet some 30 years later in 1969. This version was recorded at Anderson’s Spartanburg home by Sam Charters in 1961. The song’s core subject treats infidelity in a comic fashion: a man jumping out a window to escape a jealous husband and leaves parting instructions to get his clothes and shoes back.

## 20 DIRTY MISTREATER

**Sonny Terry**, harmonica and vocal; **Brownie McGhee**, guitar;  
**J.C. Burris**, harmonica

*From Sonny Terry’s New Sound: The Jaw Harp in Blues and Folk Music with  
Brownie McGhee and J.C. Burris, Folkways 3821*

Sonny Terry’s nephew and protégé, J.C. Burris (1928–1988), adds a second harmonica on this 1958 Folkways session. Burris—who also danced, played bones, and performed with a wooden puppet called Mr. Jack—came from Kings Mountain in the North Carolina Piedmont. He moved to New York to join his uncle in 1949, then in the 1960s on to California, where he worked as a street musician in San Francisco. An excellent songwriter given to social commentary, he recorded for Arhoolie in 1976, producing an album titled *Blues Professor*. In New York he recorded several sides for Herald with his uncle in 1960 and an album for Bluesville, as well as two 1958 Folkways albums.

Terry and McGhee had recorded an earlier “Dirty Mistreater, Don’t You Know” for Capitol in 1950 and another for Folkways in 1954. Basically the song is an expurgated knockoff of a traditional obscene insult game often called “The Dozens” or “Dirty Dozens.” Speckled Red put out a cleaned-up version on Brunswick in 1929 simply titled “The Dirty Dozen,” quickly followed by “The Dirty Dozen No. 2” in 1930 and an unissued No. 3 the same year. Competition heated up when Tampa Red released his own 1930 “The Dirty Dozens No. 2” on Vocalion. The song was also covered by Leroy Carr (Vocalion, 1930), Lonnie Johnson (Okeh, 1930), and Jed Davenport (Vocalion, 1930). Nor was that the end of it. Memphis Minnie and Washboard Sam put it out on Decca in 1935 and on Vocalion in 1936 with the title “Dirty Mother for You.” Roosevelt Sykes called his 1936 Decca version ‘Dirty Mother for You (Don’t





You Know),” and Frankie “Half-Pint” Jaxon returned to “The Dirty Dozen” in his 1937 Decca release. By the time Sonny Terry recorded his Folkways version, the lyrics had become PG-13; but black listeners already knew the original lyrics, and live versions could always revert to the song’s less politically correct origins.

## 21 THE ROAD IS ROUGH AND ROCKY

**Archie Edwards**, guitar and vocal

From *Classic Appalachian Blues*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40188

Born in Union Hall, Virginia, where the Piedmont meets the mountains, Archie Edwards (1918–1988) learned his music at home. His father, Roy Edwards, played guitar, banjo, and harmonica and often hosted dances. As a youngster Edwards and his brothers pooled their money and sent away for a mail order guitar. Edwards became good enough to play at local parties. He moved to New Jersey in the 1940s, then joined the Army during World War II, re-enlisting during the Korean War. In 1959 he opened a barbershop in D.C., the Alpha Tonsorial Palace, which became a gathering place for local blues musicians, including his boyhood guitar hero, Mississippi John Hurt. Following Hurt’s death in 1966, Edwards composed this song to commemorate their friendship. It was self-published on a 45 rpm record in 1977 and also used as the title for his first album. He recorded for L & R, Mapleshade, and Great Northern labels and toured Europe. Following his death in 1998, the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation was formed to keep his memory alive and to sponsor informal jam sessions. A tireless advocate for his chosen art form, he contributed most to the Piedmont tradition by maintaining the barbershop community he nurtured and inspired, teaching dozens of aspiring musicians his version of the blues. This cut comes from a live Smithsonian Folklife Festival performance in 1978.





Port Tobacco houses. Charles County, Maryland, 1936-37. Photograph by F. B. Johnston.

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SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS



Archie Edwards. Photograph by Lisa Falk.

With a selection of indelible recordings made over 70 years, *Classic Piedmont Blues* captures the essence of this fascinating blues tradition. Originating in the foothills of Southern Appalachia, the Piedmont blues served as a breeding ground for cross-pollination between traditions: rural and urban, black and white, country and coastal. Swept up on the tide of the Great Migration, it was carried from the Carolinas and Virginia, north and east through Maryland and Washington, D.C., to New York City and back again. Featuring influential artists like John Jackson, Cephas & Wiggins, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, and many others, this collection offers an illuminating overview of the Piedmont style. 64 minutes, 36-page booklet with extensive notes.

1. **TRUCKIN' LITTLE BABY**—John Jackson 3:00
2. **MAMIE**—John Cephas and Phil Wiggins 4:13
3. **HEY BARTENDER, THERE'S A BIG BUG IN MY BEER**  
Warner Williams and Eddie Pennington 2:47
4. **CONFUSION**—Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry 3:21
5. **T.B. BLUES**—Josh White 3:24
6. **IF I COULD HOLLER LIKE A MOUNTAIN JACK**  
Baby Tate 3:06
7. **CLOG DANCE**—Hobart Smith 1:09
8. **DAISY**—Brownie McGhee 3:27
9. **GOING DOWN THE ROAD FEELING BAD**  
Elizabeth Cotten 2:13
10. **I GOT A WOMAN 'ROSS TOWN**—Pink Anderson 1:56
11. **RED RIVER BLUES**—John Jackson 3:01
12. **I AIN'T GONNA PICK NO MORE COTTON**  
Warner Williams and Jay Summerour 3:50
13. **SWEET WOMAN**—Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee 3:06
14. **THE TRAIN THAT CARRIED MY GIRL FROM TOWN**  
Doc Watson 2:22
15. **MOUNTAIN JACK**—Reverend Gary Davis 3:31
16. **CROW JANE**—John Cephas and Phil Wiggins 3:04
17. **FORE DAY CREEP**—Brownie McGhee 4:14
18. **SITTIN' ON TOP OF THE WORLD**—Roscoe Holcomb 2:43
19. **MEET ME IN THE BOTTOM**—Pink Anderson 3:33
20. **DIRTY MISTREATER**  
Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and J.C. Burris 3:01
21. **THE ROAD IS ROUGH AND ROCKY**—Archie Edwards 3:24



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