

JOSEPH SPENCE

"Bahamian Guitarist"

Over 60 Minutes of Classic Guitar Sounds



1. Out on the Rolling Sea (5:45)
 2. I See Mary and Joseph (2:40)
 3. Oh, How I Love Jesus (3:13)
 4. I Bid You Good Night (3:25)
 5. Coming In on a Wing and a Prayer (3:15)
 6. Good Morning Mr. Walker (3:15)
 7. The Glory of Love (2:50)
 8. Don't Let Nobody Burn Down Burma Road (2:30)
 9. Bye and Bye (1:50) (*)
 10. If I had the Wings of a Dove (3:00) (*)
 11. All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name (2:10) (*)
 12. Don't Take Everybody to be Your Friend (2:55) (*)
 13. Brown Skin Gal (2:52) (*)
 14. Neighbor Gone Home (2:33) (*)
- Concert:**
15. He Walks With Me (2:25) (*)
 16. Will the Serpent be Unbroken (3:15) (*)
 17. The Lord's My Shepherd (3:15) (*)
 18. Yellow Bird (2:37) (*)
 19. Sloop John B. (3:40)
 20. Be a Friend to Jesus (2:50)
 21. Mary Ann (3:00)

Total time: 62:20



Joseph Spence – guitar and vocal sounds

(*) PREVIOUSLY UNISSUED

All other selections originally issued on Arhoolie 1061

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Recorded May 16, 1971

Engineered by DurG Gessner

Supervised by Jack Viertel

Produced by Chris Strachwitz and Dick Waterman

Cover by Elizabeth Weil

Cover photo by Guy Droussart

All songs arranged by Joseph Spence and
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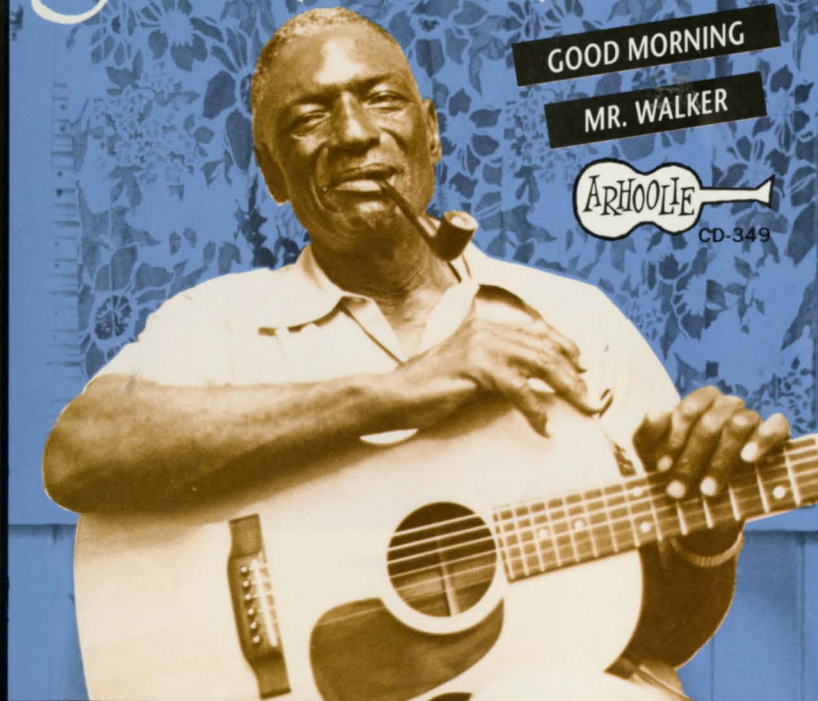
Arhoolie Catalog
10341 San Pablo Ave.
El Cerrito, CA 94530

B A H A M I A N G U I T A R I S T

Joseph Spence

GOOD MORNING

MR. WALKER





Joseph Spence

Photo: ANDREW LTD. NASSAU

Joseph Spence

Toward the end of April, 1971, as the school year was drawing to a close, I received a call from Dick Waterman, manager and companion to many of the best rural and urban blues men. "I got a letter from Spence," he said. "He wants to come to Boston in ten days. Do you think we can do it?" I didn't know, and said so. Dick had been helping the Boston Blues Society, a group of about six friends, to present rural blues men in concert on the Harvard University campus, but Spence, coming from the Bahamas, seemed a little out of their league, and ten days didn't give us much time to do publicity and advertising for the concert. I hemmed and hawed and took so long weighting all sides of the proposal that Dick finally took the thing into his own hands and the BBS went to work trying to find a hall (our usual

concert hall had been previously booked) and poster makers and printers who could work around the clock. Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records agreed to finance the trip in return for the recording rights, and Larry Estridge, a friend of the society, agreed to put Spence up in his apartment. On a Friday night, nine exhausting days later, Joseph Spence arrived in Boston.

Having dealt with quite a few rural blues singers throughout the school year, many of whom cannot read or write, and most of whom are justly uncomfortable in a northern city like Cambridge, MA, we were prepared for almost anything from Joseph Spence, who came from Nassau and had worked most of his sixty years as a stone mason. The one thing we did not expect was that Joseph Spence would ask politely, but

firmly, for his own key to Larry's apartment, and that he would be seen flying kites on the banks of the Charles River, eating in some of Cambridge's finer Chinese restaurants, looking through the stock of several of the town's more radical clothing stores, and strutting through Harvard Square, his straw hat perched jauntily on his head, waving to all of his new made friends.

"I'm a stranger in a strange land," he said to Larry several times a day, "looking for a friend."

Larry took it all good naturedly. Spence obviously found friends wherever he was with people. Because of scheduling problems the recording session for the studio part of this album was the afternoon of the concert. The "studio" in question was the apartment of DurG Gessner, a member of the Boston Blues Society, and the only permanent member of Harvard Radio's folk

music department. The room was small, and with equipment spread all over it was quite cramped for the five or six of us who sat on the couch, floor, and equipment boxes while Spence sat in the middle of the room on a metal chair. Although he had brought his own guitar from Nassau, he had become fond of my Martin D-18, and used it for the session. He began with several hymns, and the moment he played his first note, there was no point in trying to stop him. DurG just kept the machines going trying to miss as little as possible in the changing of reels and the volume setups, and we all sat and watched, more or less open mouthed, as Joseph ran through a repertoire that included, in addition to hymns, folk songs, sea chanties, old tin pan alley pop tunes, children's game songs and even one genuine calypso number. He seemed, however, to make no distinction as to the 'type' of song

he was singing. As far as he was concerned they were all just songs, and his unique approach made each uniquely his own invention.

Spence plays almost exclusively in the key of D, in the standard tuning with the sixth string dropped from E to D (D-A-D-G-B-E) but his guitar is slightly "out of tune" by European standards. There is no sloppiness in this. He tunes very precisely by playing the same figures over and over again until he is satisfied, and the guitar is always tuned to the same pitches. They simply aren't the pitches that a trained ear would call correct. His guitar playing is as idiosyncratic and his repertoire is eclectic, and to the best of my knowledge, no musician has been able to successfully imitate him, not that it would be a particularly fruitful endeavor if accomplished. He frequently employs counterpoint and rhythmic shifts so complex that

they far surpass the musicianship of almost all non-classical guitarists working today, and his control of melodic variation is simply astounding. His voice, also inimitable, is used as a secondary instrument more than as a means for communicating words. It provides a solid, if somewhat gravelly, base for the guitar's fluid lines to play off of and frequently serves as a reminder of how the basic melody of a given piece goes, when the guitar variations have become almost too complex to follow.

Listening to Spence record that day, all of us were aware that there was a real creative process going on in our presence. Spence's performance was the creation, not simply a recreated performance of a folk art.

After the long session we feared that Joseph would be exhausted, but after a large Chinese dinner the concert got underway with all of his energy seemingly

intact. Surprisingly, the hall was packed, packed with people who had heard the Folkways *Music From The Bahamas Volume One* album, (recorded by Sam Charters some years ago), and wanted to know if it was possible for one man to really sound like Joseph Spence sounded on the record. From the cheers that greeted his first song one can only assume that Spence was everything that was expected of him. Nor was he to be denied his claim to unpredictability, interrupting the concert at one point to have a conversation with a four-year-old boy in the front of the hall, and at another to laugh good naturedly, "I don't know none of the words to these songs, so I just sing 'la dee dee dee'..." He finished with "Good Night, Good Night, Good Night," and was awarded a standing ovation.

The next morning Larry and I drove Joseph to the airport. He had to catch a plane for Chicago

where he had yet another university to undo. As we stood at the gate saying goodbye, Spence asked us both to visit him in Nassau.

"OK," said Larry smiling, "But Joseph, I'll be a stranger in a strange land."

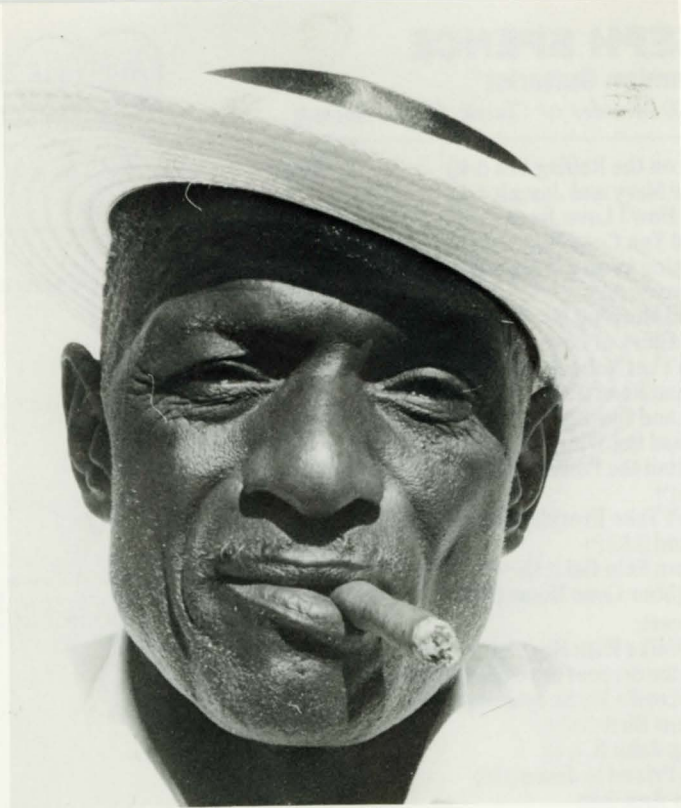
Spence looked at him a moment, "You will," he said seriously, "But you'll have a friend."

(Jack Viertel - 1971)

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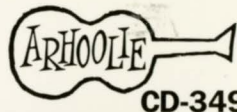
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Joseph Spence (born: 8/3/1910, died: 3/18/1984 Nassau, Bahamas) was a master folk artist who developed a totally unique guitar style to express his largely religious repertoire. He was a community musician much loved and respected in his neighborhood and was always ready to share his heritage and traditions with anyone who came to visit. In 1958 folklorist Sam Charters first recorded Joseph Spence's delightful rhythmic guitar improvisations (issued on the Folkways label) and stirred up a great deal of interest among folk music enthusiasts the world over. In 1971 Joseph Spence was invited to make several concert appearances in the northeast and this recording was made during his appearance in the Boston area.

Joseph Spence – guitar and vocal sounds

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