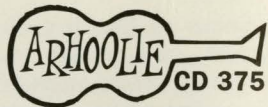


JUKE BOY BONNER

Life Gave Me A Dirty Deal



1. LIFE GAVE ME A DIRTY DEAL (3:31) (*)
2. GOING BACK TO THE COUNTRY (2:55) A
3. SAD, SAD SOUND (3:02) A
4. SHE TURNS ME ON (2:44) A
5. HARD LUCK (2:55) A
6. TRYING TO BE CONTENTED (3:08) A
7. LIFE IS A NIGHTMARE (2:26) A
8. IT'S TIME TO MAKE A CHANGE (3:26) A
9. STAY OFF LYONS AVENUE (3:20) A
10. MY BLUES (3:09) A
11. I'M GETTING TIRED (3:25) A
12. OVER TEN YEARS AGO (3:21) B
13. I GOT MY PASSPORT (2:49) B
14. I'M IN THE BIG CITY (3:30) B
15. HOUSTON, THE ACTION TOWN (2:34) B
16. RUNNING SHOES (2:33) B
17. JUST A BLUES (2:34) B
18. IT DON'T TAKE TOO MUCH (2:55) B
19. STRUGGLE HERE IN HOUSTON (2:49) B

20. RAILROAD TRACKS (2:44) B
 21. WATCH YOUR BUDDIES (3:00) B
 22. WHEN THE DEAL GOES DOWN (2:47) B
 23. BEING BLACK AND I'M PROUD (4:14) B
- Total time: 69:55

Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner - vocals, guitar and harmonica;
Alvin J. Simon - drums

A = previously issued on ARH LP 1036 and recorded in Houston, Tx., 1967 & 1968

B = previously issued on ARH LP 1045 and recorded in Houston, Tx., 1968 & 1969

(*) = previously unissued and recorded in Berkeley, Ca.

All songs written by Weldon Bonner and ©Tradition Music Co. (BMI).

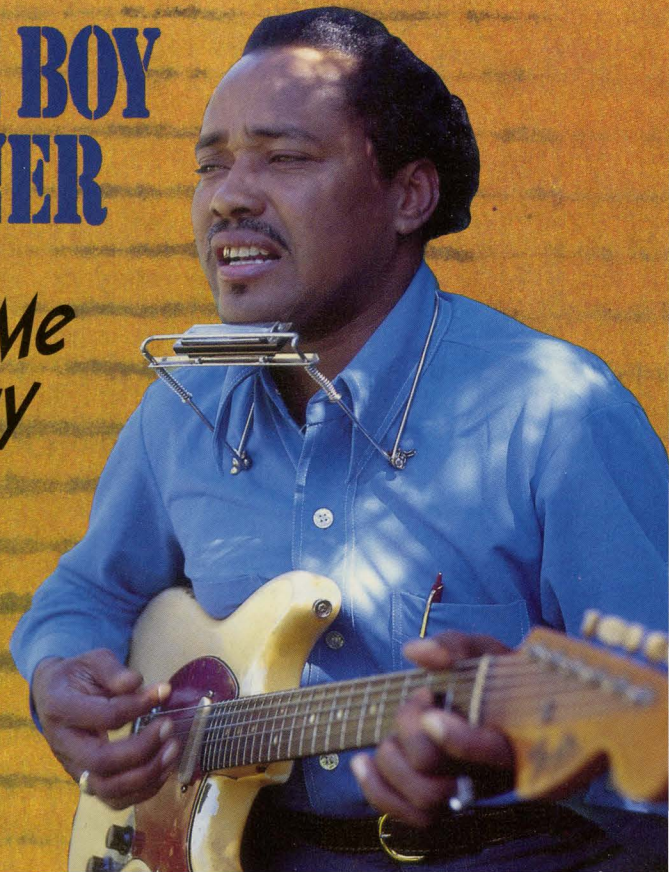
Produced by Chris Strachwitz
Cover by Wayne Pope
Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz

Copyright © & © 1967, 1968, 1969 & 1992 by Arhoolie Productions, Inc.



JUKE BOY BONNER

Life Gave Me A Dirty Deal



JUKE BOY BONNER

"Life Gave Me A Dirty Deal"

Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner's life was a constant struggle. Growing up in rural Texas he turned to poetry and music as a young man in order to vent his frustrations. Houston, the big city, beckoned with its fast life and famous entertainers, where you needed a good "hustle" to survive. There Weldon Bonner became a living one-man juke box, playing the blues hits of the day in neighborhood taverns. Impressed by **Lightning Hopkins**, Juke Boy spent his entire adult life in the shadow of this famous fellow Houston minstrel. His autobiographical poetry was every bit as valid as Lightning's, but Juke Boy's style was unfortunately never as widely received or rewarded. This collection of recordings made between 1967 and 1969 brings you some of Juke Boy Bonner's best poems put to music.

Weldon Bonner was the last of nine children of Cary and Manuel

Bonner. He was born March 22, 1932, on a sharecropper's farm run by his father, some 7 miles from Bellville, Texas, Austin County, on the road between Oakhill and Nelsonville. Weldon's father died in 1933 and left the upbringing of the large family to Weldon's mother.

Depression days in rural Texas were hard. The furnishing merchants who supported the croppers had lost most of their capital through the failure of the banks. The croppers, who in a good year might have cleared \$150.00, were busted flat. The Bonner family was forced to resort to dispersion to stay alive. At the age of three years, Weldon was sent to live with an elderly couple who could afford to take him in and feed him. In 1940 his mother died.

Weldon went to live with his older sister when he was thirteen. He chopped cotton during the season and one day spent \$3.50 of his hard

earned money to buy a guitar from a friend. Music was an avenue for escape.

Weldon's first guitar was stolen from him before he had owned it a year. There were no more bargain guitars around Bellville and it took the almost impossible sum of \$12.50 to purchase a replacement. Soon Weldon was accomplished enough to begin playing at the country dances and suppers around Bellville for a few dollars. He played in Brenham, Katy, Brookshire and Bellville.

Around Christmas of 1947 Weldon and his guitar arrived in Houston. He was soon drawn to the Lincoln Theater where Trummy Cain, a local disc jockey, hosted a weekly talent show. Larry Williams' band played and Trummy tapped the vast well of available talent in Houston's Black wards. Weldon won the talent contest and was offered a slot on a fifteen minute radio show hosted by Henry Atlas, a Fifth Ward record retailer and juke box operator. The radio show on KLEE led to local dates and a degree

of financial security.

Perhaps the most unhappy period in Weldon Bonner's life was his marriage. His wife left him after giving him what he considers the greatest gift in his life, his three children. Not much has been written about the family lives of Blues performers but Weldon Jr., David Ray and Debra deserve mention. Weldon lavished attention, education, responsibilities, and affection on his family. They are all wonderful, lively, intelligent young people and stand a much better than average chance of making it in a world that often deals harshly with the young.

In 1956 Weldon found himself in Oakland, California. He sought out the attention of Bob Geddins, a "record man" known for his interest in blues. The war time defense industry boom in the Oakland-San Francisco Bay area had drawn thousands of Texas Blacks west. Weldon tried to find local gigs, but it was a never-ending struggle. Geddins released a couple of numbers by Weldon on his IRMA label, but the record did not sell.

In 1960, after his return to his native Texas, Weldon went to Eddie Schuler of Lake Charles, La. who operated Goldband Records, but again Weldon's records did not get air play and did not sell. His reputation was limited to the small neighborhood beer joints which catered to the country people. They were not big record buyers, and both labels had only limited distribution facilities.

Perhaps the real low point in Weldon's life came the day President Kennedy was cut down by Texas bullets in a Texas town. Weldon was in Houston's Ben Taub Hospital being operated on for a chronic stomach ulcer. The surgeons removed 45% of his stomach and most of his physical strength. Although Weldon was too weak to play his guitar, he began to write poetry. At first rough, loosely formed verses and then, later, poems that were good enough to be published by the **Forward Times**, an African-American weekly newspaper in Houston. The poems dealt with religious subjects, episodes in his life,

the civil rights movement, and his reaction to events. He became almost a regular feature in the paper. Eventually he wrote down over 350 poems in a neat hand on inexpensive tablet sheets.

As Weldon regained his strength he began to set some of his poems to music. Weldon's stomach condition was still delicate; he had to eat 5 or 6 small meals a day to avoid further irritation. He worked at a local RCA record distributor. As soon as his strength returned he took a weekend job playing in a weather-beaten honky-tonk in the Third Ward called the "Family Inn." One of the reporters at the **Forward Times** went to see what had happened to their "house poet" and did a feature article on Weldon's return to the musical world.

Weldon's guitar and harmonica playing is derivative in the traditional sense. He owed much of his harmonica styling to **Jimmy Reed** and **Sonny Boy Williamson** and his guitar style is often reminiscent of Lightening Sam Hopkins. But Weldon fil-

tered these styles through his own creative mind. A master lyricist, he shaped his music into something uniquely his own. All stylistic similarities fade in such powerful songs as *Going Back to the Country*, *It's Time to Make a Change* and *Stay Off Lyons Avenue*.

In his lyrics Weldon has presented the listener with fresh material in a traditional manner. He has, without knowing it, echoed Robert Frost's dicta of producing "newness in an old way." Frost maintained that there were two ways to be new: the new way, striking down all previously tried forms and establishing new ones; and the old way, using traditional forms to express new ideas and emotions. Weldon says in *Going Back to the Country*:

*I'm going back to the country
Way back to my old home town (2X)*

*Where I don't have to worry
about nobody else's troubles
And ain't nobody burning the build-
ings down.*

*Now I'm not crazy about country living
And it's not really my desire (2X)*

*But if I move back to the sticks
I don't have to worry about no sniper's
fire.*

He uses a standard Blues form, but it is the lyrics which capture the frustrations of Black life during the riots of the "Long Hot Summer." Weldon knew that it was Black homes and businesses that suffer most in the riots and that the majority of the casualties are black.

While almost all of Weldon's songs are carefully composed he was an improviser too. The Texas Blues tradition almost demands that an artist be able to instantly compose a passable song on any given subject. Sam Hopkins excelled at this ability but Weldon too could be highly creative on a moment's notice. Witness his *Stay off Lyons Avenue*:

*You know what?
When you go down to Houston
You'll learn you some bad news,*

You better stay off Lyons Avenue

*Cause you go there,
You go there green
Somewhere there on Jensen,
The last time you be seen*

*You know how it is
Boy, you know how it is*

*You know what?
If you ever walk around on Houston's
streets*

*You like to be real wise
And stay off the Lyons Avenue street
And don't go down on Jensen no
where
Because you're living on luck and a
prayer.*

*You know things happen to us some
times,
To the best of us and to the worst of us
and stuff. But you're asking for it,
Any time you hit on Blood Alley,
Lyons Avenue just off Jensen,
It ain't hard to find
All you have to do is go around there and
You'll find cats almost dying,
It ain't hard to find.*

True, the song is more or less formless, but it beautifully captures the toughest street corner in Houston, Lyons and Jensen. As a friend aptly put it, "there's cats out there that can't sleep nights less they killed someone." The block just south of Lyons and Jensen is popularly known as "Pearl Harbor" because more men have met their maker there than did at its namesake on December 7, 1941.

In the 1970s the Blues were still popular with a portion of the Black audience in Houston. People in the Fifth Ward, Acres Homes and Sunnyside were still listening to the Blues. But the jukebox was cheaper, played all the hits by all the hit makers and attracted revenue of its own. The Bluesman had to hustle to get work and he was not alone in this hustle. There were many small rock and soul bands eager to play new music for peanuts just for the exposure.

This is a strange existence for a poet, yet no stranger than the pubs of Ireland which sheltered Yates, Devlin and Kinsella; no different from the

saloons of Seattle's First Avenue which gave solace to Theodore Roethke; not too much different from the many smoky bars inhabited by Dylan Thomas. I am sure that there are those who will not accept the idea that a Blues singer and writer can also be a great poet. There is actually little else you can justly call the real Bluesman.

In the late 1960s the late Mike Leadbitter of **Blues Unlimited** magazine in England, helped finance the release of a 45 rpm single for Juke Boy which gave him some kind of meal ticket in Houston, at least for a while. Over the following few years Juke Boy recorded these sessions for Arhoolie and went to Europe to tour with the annual American Folk Blues Festival, produced by two German Jazz and Blues fans, Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau. More solo tours followed along with more recordings and several other festival jobs in the US. Sadly, real success never came to Juke Boy Bonner. By the mid 1970s he had a hard time finding gigs and

took to the bottle with increasing frequency.

The last time I visited Juke Boy in Houston he was working at a chicken processing plant, depressing work for anyone but especially demoralizing for a sensitive poet like Weldon Bonner. He made several more albums for various labels but none made any commercial impact. On June 28, 1978, Weldon Bonner died in the small rented room where he lived. The cause of death was given as cirrhosis of the liver. Juke Boy Bonner was a remarkable poet who left us this legacy of his spirit to be heard by future generations.

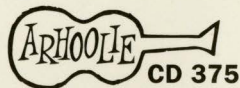
*(Chris Strachwitz and Larry Skoog –
1968, 1992)*

For our 100-page illustrated catalog with full details about hundreds of CDs, Cassettes, LPs, Videos, and other information send \$2 to cover postage to:

ARHOOLIE CATALOG
10341 San Pablo Avenue
El Cerrito, Ca. 94530 USA

JUKE BOY BONNER

Life Gave Me A Dirty Deal



Over 70 Minutes of Classic BLUES

1. LIFE GAVE ME A DIRTY DEAL (3:31) (*)
2. GOING BACK TO THE COUNTRY (2:55) A
3. SAD, SAD SOUND (3:02) A
4. SHE TURNS ME ON (2:44) A
5. HARD LUCK (2:55) A
6. TRYING TO BE CONTENTED (3:08) A
7. LIFE IS A NIGHTMARE (2:26) A
8. IT'S TIME TO MAKE A CHANGE (3:26) A
9. STAY OFF LYONS AVENUE (3:20) A
10. MY BLUES (3:09) A
11. I'M GETTING TIRED (3:25) A
12. OVER TEN YEARS AGO (3:21) B
13. I GOT MY PASSPORT (2:49) B
14. I'M IN THE BIG CITY (3:30) B
15. HOUSTON, THE ACTION TOWN (2:34) B
16. RUNNING SHOES (2:33) B
17. JUST A BLUES (2:34) B
18. IT DON'T TAKE TOO MUCH (2:55) B
19. STRUGGLE HERE IN HOUSTON (2:49) B
20. RAILROAD TRACKS (2:44) B
21. WATCH YOUR BUDDIES (3:00) B

22. WHEN THE DEAL GOES DOWN (2:47) B
23. BEING BLACK AND I'M PROUD (4:14) B

Total time: 69:55

Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner - vocals,
guitar and harmonica; Alvin J. Simon
- drums

A = previously issued on ARH LP 1036 and
recorded in Houston, Tx., 1967 & 1968

B = previously issued on ARH LP 1045 and
recorded in Houston, Tx., 1968 & 1969

(*) = previously unissued and recorded in
Berkeley, Ca.

All songs written by Weldon Bonner and ©
Tradition Music Co. (BMI).

Produced by Chris Strachwitz

Cover by Wayne Pope

Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz

Copyright © & © 1967, 1968, 1969 & 1992 by Arhoolie Prod., Inc.



0

9629-70375-2

2

