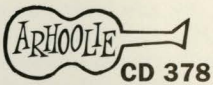


JOHN JACKSON

"Don't Let Your Deal Go Down"



1. GOING DOWN IN GEORGIA
ON A HORN (2:27)
2. BLACK SNAKE MOAN (2:06)
3. JOHN HENRY (3:49)
4. IF HATTIE WANTS TO LU,
LET HER LU LIKE A MAN (1:58)
5. NOBODY'S BUSINESS BUT MINE (2:57)
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11. REUBEN (2:00)
12. ROCKS AND GRAVEL (3:10)
13. GOING DOWN THE ROAD FEELIN' BAD
(3:45) (with Mike Seeger - 2nd guitar)
14. POLICE DOG BLUES (3:30)
15. DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN (2:05)
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26. YOU AIN'T NO WOMAN (1:55)

Total time: 69:56

JOHN JACKSON – vocals and
guitar (or banjo on #4).

Produced by Chris Strachwitz
Cover by Wayne Pope
Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz
Notes by Chuck Perdue

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many on Oct. 23, 1969, and originally
issued on ARH LP 1025.

#12–18 recorded in Fairfax Sta-
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#19–26 recorded in Stuttgart, Ger-
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John Jackson

DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN



JOHN JACKSON

"Don't Let Your Deal Go Down"

Sometime in 1964 I drove into a service station near my home in Fairfax, Virginia. There was a man inside the station holding a guitar and I asked him to play something. He said, "I only know a couple of chords and I can't sing at all." He then proceeded to play John Hurt's *Candy Man* and a matchless version of *Matchbox Blues*; an amazing feat for a man who knows "only a couple of chords." This was my introduction to John Jackson.

It is difficult to categorize John's music. Though he has a preference for singing and playing the recorded blues of the late twenties and early thirties, which he does with great skill and clarity, he is equally at home playing country dance music, singing songs he has learned from Jimmie Rodgers and Ernest Tubb records, or even happily shouting out *Blue Suede Shoes*! John plays the piano a little and is a good banjo picker in addition to being a consummate guitarist.

John Jackson is an amazing man in many ways. He never attended school long enough to learn to read and write, but he has managed, through hard work and determination, to provide a good living for his wife and family of seven

children. He is shy with strangers but once he knows you he will talk for hours, telling stories and tall tales from his native mountains: a story about a one ton hog that ran loose in the hills near his home; or a tale about a boy who stole a stove with a roaring fire in it and took off over the hills with it on his back.

John was born in 1924 in Rappahannock County, Virginia. His father was a tenant farmer on what had been an old plantation prior to the Civil War. Some of the old slave cabins were still standing and one was being lived in when John was growing up.

John and his thirteen brothers and sisters helped out with the farming: cutting timber, herding cows, and working at the various odd jobs necessary to feed and clothe a family of this size. John worked on the farm until he was 25 years old and had a wife and small family of his own. The pay at the time he left in 1950 was \$3.00 a day. The farm owner had a very good system for discouraging absenteeism; if you worked you made the \$3.00 a day but if you were absent (for sickness or any other reason) you were docked \$3.75 a day!

John came to Fairfax in 1950 to do

fieldwork on a farm, but spent most of his time working around the house as cook, butler, chauffeur, and general caretaker. During the 14 years that John worked at this job he supplemented his income with occasional jobs digging graves, cutting grass, chopping and hauling firewood, serving at parties, and doing yard work.

Music was an integral part of the rural African-American community in which John was raised. Dances, house parties, field hollers, church singing; all of these activities were carried on in the community and most people took an active part in them. John's father played guitar and banjo and sang blues and other types of songs. According to John, he could "holler hoola" better than anyone else in the country; when he hollered he could be heard for 5 miles.

John's mother sang hymns and played the accordion and harmonica, but his father apparently did not fancy the accordion. One morning, when John was a small boy, he got up to find the stove burning hotter than usual. There was a definite accordion smell in the air. It is not known whether his father really hated accordions that much or if he simply ran out of firewood on a particularly cold morning. John's mother never got another accordion but she continued singing hymns.

John first began to play around with the guitar when he was 4 years old and by the time he was 8 was fairly competent on it. He learned on his father's guitar which he remembers as being a \$4.98 flat-top type with a picture of a cowboy hat and a pair of cow horns on it. No one ever showed him how to play but he watched his father and others and figured things out for himself.

When John was 5 or 6 years old his father bought a second-hand Victrola and this began John's exposure to most of the songs that he has in his repertoire. The man who sold the Victrola also came around house-to-house in a horse and buggy, selling records. John's father and sisters bought most of the blues records that were offered. The most popular singers were Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, and Jimmie Rodgers.

An important influence was also the acquaintance struck up by the Jackson family with "Happy," a waterboy on a nearby road gang when John was about 10 years old. From Happy came open tuning and knife guitar techniques which John might have missed had Happy been sent elsewhere to serve out his time.

John's father played, sang, and danced at the many house parties given in the area and as John grew older he also began to play at parties. There was

never much money around but there was plenty to eat and drink at these parties. The drinks were obligingly supplied (for a price) by a white man who came to the house where the party was being held riding a mule loaded down with his own brand of homebrew and a goodly supply of a drink called "Hen," made from corn meal.

When John was growing up, whites and blacks alike had house parties and dances and there was some mixing. To what degree each group learned the other's songs is not clear.

I was sitting around with John one evening playing guitar and talking about this and that when I happened to mention DeFord Bailey, the famous black harmonica player of some years back. I told John that Bailey was the only black musician to regularly appear on the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee in the early days. John looked somewhat perplexed and said, "But what about Uncle Dave Macon?"

John's unawareness that Uncle Dave Macon was white says much for Macon's musical style and choice of material. Music has historically shown little respect for boundaries and the color line in the American South is no exception. The borrowing of tunes, texts, and techniques has gone back and forth so much it is

difficult to say who owes what to whom! For example, John Jackson's brother-in-law, Mr. Hill, once had a small group called "The Toe Ticklers" who played for dances and parties on weekends. In 1937 Mr. Hill was working on the railroad near Cincinnati and he taught some guitar picking techniques to a white kid who was working with them. The kid, it turns out, was Merle Travis. Some years later John Jackson was listening to (and learning from) Merle Travis records!

Several of John's brothers used to play guitar and sing but only two, Jack and Freddy, still do much playing. John sometimes plays with Jack and Freddy for dances at a hunt club near his home in Rappahannock County. Until the mid-1960s these occasions were the only ones on which John was paid for his playing.

One night, shortly before coming to Fairfax, John was playing at a house party when a drunk who was jealous of John's playing came in. He stole a girl's purse and accused John of stealing his guitar, and started a bloody fight which broke up the party, as well as several people. John was so upset by the whole affair that he very nearly quit playing for good. For 10 years after he didn't even own a guitar and played only on infrequent occasions when someone else brought an instrument to his house.

When I met John he had acquired a guitar (some fellow pawned it to him and has never returned for it) but was not playing much. Within a few months however, John was able to play at the Ontario Place in Washington where Chris Strachwitz, who happened to be in town with Mance Lipscomb, heard him. Selections #1 - 8 resulted.

In summary then we can say that here is a talented and creative man whose pride in his work is reflected both in his music and in the square, clean sides of the graves he digs. His musical repertoire consists of songs learned from recordings of the popular singers of his time — i.e., Race and Hillbilly recording artists, songs from various other sources that were popular with his peer group; and "personal songs," learned from his family, which have meaning beyond the songs themselves.

(Compiled from liner notes to ARH 1025, 1035, and 1047 written by Chuck Perdue in 1965, 1968 and Chuck & Nan Perdue in 1970.)

The songs:

1. GOING DOWN IN GEORGIA ON A HORN - "On the hog," is a hobo expression from the 1930s — possibly older — and it means "in a bad way financially," or broke. (There is a version of *Come 'way to Georgia to Git on a Hog* in **The Negro**

and His Songs, Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, 1925.) On March 16, 1928, Benzie Burrells was sent to the Richmond Penitentiary for seven years when he was found guilty of second degree murder. When he returned to Rappahannock County he brought this song with him. Somewhere along the way "hog" became "horn."

4. IF HATTIE WANTS TO LU, LET HER LU LIKE A MAN - John does not know the source for this instrumental song; just that it was widely known in his home area and played by his father, among others. Attempts to discuss this song with people who knew it usually elicited laughter and an exchange of knowing looks.

6. JOHN'S RAG - This is an instrumental piece made up by John, apparently influenced by such tunes as *Guitar Boogie*. This piece was part of John's repertoire at the time we met in 1964, but it has become somewhat more complex since that time as it rapidly became a favorite performance piece with audiences.

7. BOATS UP THE RIVER - John believes that school children made this song up when he spent a few months in the first grade in Rappahannock County, ca. 1930. Parts of it, however, are traditional and have been reported from Alabama in 1915-16 (**American Negro Folksongs**, Newman I. White) and from Texas (**On the**

Trail of Negro Folk Song, Dorothy Scarborough).

8. RATTLESNAKIN' DADDY - John says that he learned this song from a recording by Blind Boy Fuller. Fuller recorded it in New York City on July 23, 1935.

9. FLATFOOT & BUCK DANCE - John learned these two tunes from his father. They are traditional in Rappahannock County and are used to accompany the dances named. These are solo dances with a circle of people usually gathered around the dancer and shouting encouragement. There is, too, an air of competition as one dancer replaces another.

10. BEAR CAT BLUES - John learned this from one of his neighbors in Rappahannock County (Benzine Burles) who had picked it up in prison where he was spending a little time for murder.

11. REUBEN - This is a common Southern Mountain song which has been recorded by just about everybody under one title or another (*Train 45, 900 Miles, 500 Miles, Old Reuben, Reuben's Train*, etc.) John tunes his guitar to what he calls "banjo tuning" (an open G chord) and then plays by frailing, banjo-style.

12. ROCKS AND GRAVEL - This is another song picked up in prison by a Rappahannock County man (Roosevelt Carter) who probably learned the hard way that "rocks and gravel make a solid

road."

13. GOING DOWN THE ROAD FEELIN' BAD - This song is a standard in the repertoire of both white and black singers. John is backed up here by Mike Seeger on second guitar.

14. POLICE DOG BLUES - John learned this in the 1940s from a Blind Blake recording. He plays it in an open tuning he calls, "Spanish."

15. DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN - This song has been widely recorded by Hillbilly and Blues artists - sometimes under other titles (*Old Black Dog, When Your Last Gold Dollar is Gone*, etc.).

16. MULESKINNER BLUES - This song was recorded by Jimmie Rodgers under the title, *Blue Yodel No. 8*, and has become extremely popular with white and black musicians in the Southern Mountains.

17. I BRING MY MONEY - John learned this song from his father who picked it up from the Grigsby boys about 1910. Eddie and Jesse Grigsby, from around Peola Mills, Va., had a small band that played for dances.

18. JOHN'S RAGTIME - John made this one up when he was touring Europe in October, 1969.

19. RED RIVER BLUES - John learned this from a 78 by Blind Boy Fuller titled *Bye Bye Baby Blues*.

20. KNIFE BLUES - John put this together

in the late 1960s. He says a lot of people he knew in this area played knife style guitar, though some used a piece of soft lead bent around their little finger rather than a knife. One man who came in from Pennsylvania, Joe Casey, used a lemon drop bottle about half full of water which gave a "quivering sound." His innovation did not catch on.

21. TRUCKING LITTLE BABY - This comes from a Blind Boy Fuller recording.

23. GOODBYE BOOZE - John learned this from his father. A rather common tune, heard also in John Hurt's *Creole Belle*.

24. GRAVEYARD BLUES - John remembered the title of this song from a 78 recording by Jim Jackson (no relation) but made up most of this version himself.

25. EARLY MORNING BLUES - Learned from a 78 recording by Blind Blake.

26. YOU AIN'T NO WOMAN - John met Bill Jackson (no relation) at the Smithsonian Festival in July, 1969, and heard him sing this song. John later remembered two verses and added one of his own. (Bill Jackson can be heard on *Long Steel Rail*, Testament LP 201.)

The 28 years since writing the notes to John Jackson's first album have seen many changes in John's life. Two of his sons have died (Ned in 1977 and John Jr.

in 1978), and his wife, Cora, died in October of 1990. John's brother Jack, (mentioned in the notes above), has died but brother Freddie continues to play music now and then.

John still works as a grave-digger, but presently he is semi-retired. He does, however, actively perform his music around much of the United States. And, since his first album was recorded, John has performed in most of the countries of Europe - some several times. He has sung the blues in Bangla Desh and Sri Lanka, and while he was on a tour of South America, he was almost caught in the Chilean coup.

In 1986, John was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts, giving official recognition to what John's audiences and friends already knew - that he was, and is, a national treasure.

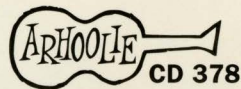
(Chuck Perdue - 1992)

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Over 60 Minutes of Classic BLUES

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Total time: 69:56

JOHN JACKSON – vocals and
guitar (or banjo on #4, with Mike
Seeger - 2nd guitar on #13).

John Jackson, from Rappahannock County, Virginia, is a national treasure, 1986 recipient of the National Heritage Fellowship, consummate guitarist equally at home singing the blues, playing country dance music, or frailing the banjo (#4). John has earned his living mostly as a grave digger, but has toured widely in recent years with his music. This CD presents John Jackson's best recordings made between 1965 and 1969.

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