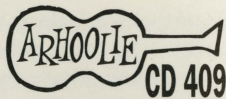


LIL' SON JACKSON

Blues Come to Texas



1. BLUES COME TO TEXAS
2. CAIRO BLUES
3. TICKET AGENT
4. LOUISE BLUES
5. SUGAR MAMA
6. THE GIRL I LOVE
7. SANTA FE BLUES
8. TURN YOUR LAMP
DOWN LOW
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11. CHARLEY CHERRY (take 1)
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14. ROLLIN' MILL WENT DOWN
15. RED RIVER BLUES
16. JOHNNIE MAE
17. BUCK DANCE (*)
18. I WALKED FROM DALLAS (*)
19. ROCK ME (*)
20. ROBERTA BLUES

Total Time: 45:34



Melvin "Lil' Son" Jackson –
guitar & vocals

(*) = previously unissued
Cover photo by Paul Oliver
Edited & produced by Chris Strachwitz
Cover design by Wayne Pope
Recorded by Chris Strachwitz in summer
of 1960 in Dallas, Texas.

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Photo by Chris Strachwitz

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Lil' Son Jackson

BLUES COME TO TEXAS



LIL' SON JACKSON

"Blues Come to Texas"

The blues had a second wave of popularity during a relatively short but booming decade following World War II. Hundreds of songsters, field hands, factory workers, and ex-service men who could make up a good blues, play a mean guitar or blow a harmonica, found their way into the various make-shift recording studios which sprang up all over the country. They made records (78 and by the mid 50s, 45 rpm discs) by the thousands for record producers who sensed a demand, mainly from juke box operators, for earthy down-home blues. It was a nice way to make a few dollars for both singers and record producers alike. Some records would sell well if they got good radio play on the ever-growing number of radio stations devoting time to African-American programming. There was a definite business opportunity for artists who developed a following among the hundreds of thousands of ex-farm

workers who had moved to the cities during World War II in search for better paying jobs.

Some blues artists took advantage of their new found fame, modest as it may have been. Some had the chance to join package shows consisting of several good selling "Rhythm & Blues" recording artists and play various auditoriums and veteran's halls in the major cities which had large populations of ex-southerners who liked "down-home" blues. Such shows, especially on the West Coast, would appeal to a cross-over audience which in many areas included Mexican-Americans and a sprinkling of white faces. On the bill would usually be a vocal group, a "honking" sax band, as well as several blues singers. Most of the "down home" type blues singers, however, never made it onto the big national tours. Rather, they found an audience closer to home: in the beer joints and small dance halls

across the land where folks from the country congregated. Washboard Sam, Sonny Boy Williamson, Memphis Slim, and many others had already cracked open the door to serve this circuit back in the 1930s at the end of the first blues boom but the post war era saw a dramatic increase in the business of "down home" blues. Little did anyone at that time realize how this emotional, poetic, basic and powerful music would soon change the sound and face of American popular music and appeal to audiences around the world.

Lil' Son Jackson was one of the many authentic blues singers who came to the attention of the American public via his recordings after World War II. He sent a sample of his work, which he had recorded for 25¢ in a booth similar to an instant photo machine, to Gold Star Records in Houston, Texas. That company was having considerable success in marketing the blues of a fellow Texan, Lightning Hopkins. Owner Bill Quinn was impressed and called Lil' Son to Houston to record even though at first he first wondered why he would need another

artist in the Hopkins style. After a few superb releases on Gold Star (all of which are heard on Arhoolie CD 352) which received only regional distribution, talent scouts for the well-distributed Imperial label recorded Lil' Son Jackson and he soon became a well-known name on juke boxes in Black ghettos all over America.

Melvin Jackson was born in north-eastern Texas near Tyler, on August 17, 1916, and spent his early life on a farm where his father was share cropping. His father, Johnny Jackson, would sometimes sing blues around the house. His mother, Ivora Allen, who played guitar in a holiness church, soon moved to a farm near Barry, Texas, which is just south of Dallas. There Melvin spent most of his childhood. When he was about 16 years old, he ran off on his own after he had moved to Corsicana with his mother. During these years he heard the records of Blind Lemon Jefferson, and some of the songs and guitar styles of that famous and popular Texas blues singer deeply impressed young Melvin. Although Lonnie Johnson was his "favorite," blues men such as Blind Blake,

Walter Davis, and Texas Alexander were other influences. The Holiness church was also a strong influence on Melvin Jackson and continued to be throughout his life. In 1960 he told me that the blues and church didn't mix and that he only continued to perform blues as long as it was financially rewarding and not bringing misery to others.

In the early 1930s, Lil' Son, a nickname given to him because of his relatively small stature, went off to Dallas to try his luck as a mechanic. But hard times forced him to take on many other odd jobs to carry him through the Depression years. Around 1934 Melvin formed a group called the Blue Eagle Four. Throughout this period he sang and played guitar mostly in church and not really in front of the secular public though sometimes he would sing blues at parties and for friends. By 1940 he had been to Houston and a year later he was back in Dallas mostly finding work as a mechanic. On January 10, 1944, Melvin Jackson was drafted into the army and saw service in Wales, France,

and Germany but only occasionally sang for his buddies. With his skills as a mechanic he was fortunate to serve in the Quartermaster Corps of the US Army.

Shortly after the war, having returned to his old job as a mechanic in Dallas, some of his friends persuaded Lil' Son to record a disc in an amusement gallery where one could have one's voice recorded for 25¢. With his guitar he sang *Roberta Blues* and *2:16 Blues* which he sent off to Bill Quinn in Houston, who at the time operated Gold Star Recording Company, one of the leading small independent Texas labels. Son Jackson was pleasantly surprised when a few days later he received a telegram from Mr. Quinn asking him to come to Houston to record some numbers. He was paid \$200 per side and actually received royalties on several selections. His unique style, both vocally and instrumentally, was very appealing and his records were soon on most juke boxes throughout the Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana area. Music suddenly became Lil' Son Jackson's full-time occupation and with it came a rather hec-

tic, frantic life of which he didn't have particularly fond memories.

Music, however, got Son Jackson to travel. First back to Houston where he recorded for Gold Star and met Lightning Hopkins and then all around Texas. Later, when he started recording for Imperial, he traveled west to Los Angeles where he met many other of his contemporaries such as Smokey Hogg, Lowell Fulson, and Fats Domino. He played local gigs, including the Zanzibar in Dallas from 1948 to 1954, where he met Zuzu Bollin, and then went on tours. With his entry into the "music business" came the urge to conform to the standards of the R & B trade at the time. He got a band together—rhythm section and even a sax—but being a very individualistic artist, this group never enhanced Lil' Son's performances. Bill Quinn wanted no part of this "band" for recording purposes, but Imperial Records latched on to his talents and Son Jackson continued to record and perform actively for the next decade. Although the band appears on many of the Imperial recordings, his better sell-

ers were usually sides which featured only his haunting vocals along with his hypnotic guitar work. One night in 1956, on a return trip from an engagement in Oklahoma, the driver of his car fell asleep at the wheel and Lil' Son was hospitalized with serious injuries for quite some time. Strong religious convictions and the simple fact that his personality was not suited for the aggressive life of a public performer, Lil' Son Jackson gave up the music business and returned to his skills as a mechanic for a livelihood.

The cover photo shows where we met Lil' Son Jackson—at the Union Salvage—263 West Commerce in Dallas in the summer of 1960. As a school teacher at Los Gatos High School in California, it was the start of my summer vacation and I had driven to Texas with my friend Bob Pinson, who wanted to get to Ft. Worth to visit relatives. I was determined to get to Houston in my old car and I had bought a tape recorder and microphone with the hope of recording my idol, Lightning Hopkins whom I had met the previous summer.

I had also made arrangements to meet with Paul Oliver and his wife Valerie in Memphis.

I wanted to record the Blues and was following any and all leads I could get. Paul had sent me a rather long list of blues singers who had made recordings in Dallas during the 1920s and early 30s but I had never heard any of their music. I had somehow heard that one of my favorite artists, whose records I had heard on the radio in California, Lil' Son Jackson, might be from the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. His real name, Melvin Jackson, was not in the current 1960 phone book but Bob Pinson had the good idea to go to the library and look in an older phone book for a year when Son Jackson had been an active recording artist. Sure enough, there was a listing for Melvin Jackson and when we called the number, it turned out to be the right one for the man we were looking for. Since quitting the music business Melvin Jackson had been working for an auto parts shop and did not want to be disturbed and bothered by music related people and so did not

have his name listed in the current phone book.

When Bob and I finally met Lil' Son Jackson, he was at first reluctant to record again and asked for what was for me at that time a very large fee. I guess our enthusiasm must have eventually convinced him that we were really interested in just the older style of blues and that we were hoping to sell any album which would result from the recording, primarily to blues fans in Europe, of which he had very fond memories especially when it came to meeting pretty girls during his service in the army. That July of 1960 Lil' Son Jackson recalled many of his earlier recordings, once I had brought in some of his Gold Star 78s, which I had just found in Ft. Worth. He also came up with a few more personal and traditional songs which he had not previously recorded.

Lil' Son Jackson was quite concerned about playing and performing well and admitted that only those who really had the blues could make good records while also telling us that he really was no longer deeply involved with the genre.

I feel that Son Jackson was one of many artists who had a rather limited repertoire although he played the material he knew extraordinarily well. He had a beautiful guitar style and a haunting voice but a very limited number of songs. We recorded on two occasions hoping to raise his memory a second time when Paul Oliver and Valerie were with me. Unfortunately, although he had invited a bass player to join him and he himself played an electric guitar (note # 19 on this CD), almost nothing usable came out of that second attempt to document this artist.

Most of the songs are traditional Texas blues or standards which Son Jackson adapted to his style. *Blues Come To Texas* is a fine opener and based on words used by Blind Lemon Jefferson. It sort of confirms what we later learned from Mance Lipscomb, namely that the blues probably came to Texas from Mississippi or further south. *Cairo Blues* is a very moving performance and refers to the city in Illinois which has frequently been struck by disastrous floods. *Turn Your Lamp Down Low* is

similar to the well-known *Baby Please Don't Go* and a good example of Lil Son's use of traditional material adapted to his own style. *Red River Blues* and *Rock Me* are very much the same as *Rockin' and Rollin'* which became his biggest hit on Imperial but with some changes in the lyrics. One of the best songs is no doubt *Roberta Blues*, a number from his early days when Lil' Son Jackson had not yet been so stifled by the formula for successful juke box records. Once he had a success with *Rockin' And Rollin'*, Lil' Son tried to repeat that groove endlessly along with very simple lyrics, hoping to find another hit!

In the early 1970s Melvin Jackson fell ill and he was at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Dallas when he died on May 30, 1976 of cancer.

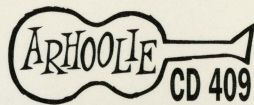
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