

## SMOKY BABE

1. I'M BROKE AND I'M HUNGRY
2. TOO MANY WOMEN (1)
3. TWO WINGS (2)
4. MISSISSIPPI RIVER (1)
5. MY BABY SHE TOLD ME (1)
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9. BAD WHISKEY
10. BLACK GAL (4)
11. MY BABY PUT ME DOWN (1)
12. GOING BACK HOME
13. REGULAR BLUES

A: Smoky Babe—vocals & guitar (on selections #1-13) with: (1) Henry Thomas (Lazy Lester) - harmonica; (2) William Dotson-vocal; (3) Sally Dotson-vocal; (4) Clyde Causey-harmonica. Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster in Scotlandville, La., February 1960. Previous issue: Folklyric LP 118 & Arhoolie LP 2019.

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## HERMAN E. JOHNSON

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16. MOTHERLESS CHILDREN
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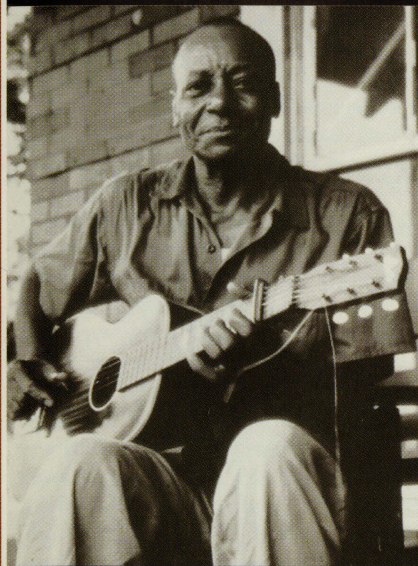
B: Herman E. Johnson—vocals and guitar (on selections #14-24, electric guitar on #17, 19, 20, & 22). Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster in Baton Rouge, La., in 1961. Previous issue: Arhoolie LP 1060.

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**Louisiana Country Blues**   
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## Herman E. Johnson



## Smoky Babe (Robert Brown)



**Louisiana Country Blues**



## Louisiana Country Blues

### SMOKY BABE

**S**mokey Babe (Robert Brown) was born in 1927 in Itta Bena, Mississippi, a farming area some fifty miles from Clarksdale, the country blues capital of the world. This section of the state, part of the delta country, has produced a long line of blues singers—Charlie Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson, Bukka White, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Joe Williams, Tommy McClennan and innumerable others who have never been recorded. His background consists of the stuff of which country blues singers are made—a few months of school, early years as a sharecropper on a plantation raising cotton, corn, and garden vegetables, frequent moves to other plantations when the crops petered out or he “didn’t get paid right,” a spell in city slums while working on a “hot truck” (a carrier of hot steel) in the mill at Bessemer, Alabama, a period as loader at the French Market in New Orleans while at the same time in the evenings he worked gigs in Black night clubs where he played for dimes, quarters, and half dollars

dancers tossed to the stage, dismal months working on the Mississippi near Baton Rouge cleaning barges, and later a post as grease monkey and mechanic at a filling station in Scotlandville, Louisiana.

In February, 1960, I was present at a jam session in Scotlandville at the house of the sister of Robert Pete Williams, Mable Lee. As usually happens at such get-togethers, neighbors hear the music pouring out and the vigorously thumping feet which make the floor heave up and down like jelly in an earthquake. They drop by to dance, chat with their friends, swap songs, laugh exuberantly, and drink Jax beer, Mogen David wine, muscat (muscatel), or whisky. Smoky, who lived a short distance from Maple Lee Williams, swaggered in—a muscular wiry man of about 5’8”, wearing a hat tilted at a rakish angle. His guitar was in pawn so I loaned him mine. As soon as he had played a few bars, rich, full, resonant, and excitingly rhythmic, I knew that here was an outstanding blues man.

Despite his rough and poverty-stricken life,



Photo by Harry Oster

*Smoky Babe, right, with Sally Dotson*



Smoky is full of high exuberance, a joy in life, which he expresses in his dance-provoking style. Although several of the blues on this record are sad in text, the overall effect of his performing is a vivid communication of his basic philosophy, that even under the most squalid and depressing circumstances, life is very much worth living.

**I'M BROKE AN' I'M HUNGRY.** Frequently penniless and hungry, rural African Americans have sung blues on this subject less often than one might expect. Some typical examples are Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Broke and Hungry," recorded for Paramount in 1926, and Sleepy John Estes' "Brokenhearted, Ragged, and Dirty Too," recorded for Victor in 1929. The theme of clandestine love, of slipping out in the morning before the woman's regular lover returns, is a common theme in blues.

**TOO MANY WOMEN.** This wild vigorous style of performing is usually identified with north Mississippi.

**TWO WINGS.** Both singers carry on spirited antiphonal exchanges. Smoky's use of a rough, hoarse vocal timbre is characteristic of much African American preaching—a means of

communicating intensity of feeling. The style of singing and the form of Smoky's variant comes from one of many records Reverend Utah Smith made of "I Want Two Wings." The guitar accompaniment is typical of Smoky's irresistibly swingy personal style.

**MISSISSIPPI RIVER.** The broad expanse of the Mississippi has often appeared in African American folksongs as a symbol of separation from a loved one. One is reminded also of the English folksong, "The Water Is Wide," collected by Cecil Sharp, which begins with the line, "The water is wide, I cannot get o'er."

**MY BABY SHE TOLD ME.** Although Henry Thomas (Lazy Lester) plays a chorus of melody on harmonica, his style is primarily antiphonal, a frequent feature of the blues: the guitar or harmonica in country blues; the trumpet, harmonica or saxophone in city blues; imitating a human voice, answers the singer.

**RABBIT BLUES.** Originally this song supplied the framework of a children's game. It was also a lively feature of quilting time, as described to me by Willie J. Thomas, a blues and spiritual singer who lives a few miles from Smoky: "My mother use to sing it at quilting time. Just before winter, on weekends an' at night, they have quilting, an' people come to

quilting' like they would to some kind o' big party. That was a big thing, quilting; the children play under the quilt while the sweet potatoes is roasting in the fire. We had sweet potatoes there an' we had the hog meat boiled, an' all the old women would get roun' an' quilt this quilt. When they nearly 'bout through rollin' it, they begin to jump Mr. Rabbit an' they sing:

*Met Mr. Rabbit in the pea vine,*

*Asked him where he was gwine.*

Made a kissin' sound with their mouth. They'd be jumpin' Mr. Rabbit. They get their dress an' tie it up like they come out o' the field. Old people then used to tie their dresses an' let 'em hang up behind, 'cause they wore much more clothes than the people wear now . . . They all do all kinda jumpin', start to shakin' their bustle an' everythin'. Some o' them ole women was over seventy, but people didn't go down bein' old like they do now . . . An' they use to have a good time then. Men totin' barrels o' whisky, man knockin' a barrel open with his head . . . They used to do some jumpin'!"

**BLACK GHOST.** The theme of being haunted by a ghost occurs occasionally in blues, as for example in Lonnie Johnson's "Blue Ghost Blues," and Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail." Smoky and Sally begin by treating the

idea of being haunted by a black ghost with grave seriousness, but as the song unfolds Sally treats Smoky's falsetto moaning with comic irony, commenting "This is sincere," implying surprise that Smoky is taking it so. One begins to suspect that the black ghost is a creature of solid flesh, a secret lover.

**AIN'T GOT NO RABBIT DOG.** Smoky's tune is essentially the same as that of the widely known bawdy song, "Uncle Bud." Clyde's vigorous swingy harmonica style is in the same tradition as Noah Lewis, who played in the late twenties and early thirties with Sleepy John Estes and Cannon's Jug Stompers, and El Watson, who recorded for Victor in the late twenties. Although the song is basically gay in spirit, the line "Uncle Bill say, 'I'm needed (needy) an' I'm poor'" gives the rabbit hunt serious overtones.

**BAD WHISKY.** In this song Smoky is playing in the bottleneck style, an approach to the guitar widely used by other guitarists from north Mississippi, Son House, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and numerous others. The technique is to wear the neck of a bottle on the little finger of the left hand, and to slide it on the strings (tuned to an open chord), creating a whining sound which resembles the human voice. As the player wishes, he can alternate using the bottle-



neck with fretting the strings with his thumb, first, second, and third fingers, and it is even possible to combine both methods. Smoky's equivalent of the bottleneck is a smoothly machined metal tube about three inches long, an automobile part.

**MY BABY PUT ME DOWN.** It has come to be customary for the singer to speak to the accompanying instrument toward the end of a blues, to say something like, "Play it now ole guitar," as though it were a human being. Smoky says to the harmonica, "Pick it up from there now," and at the end of the song, "Talk

about it now, buddy." Henry Thomas' harmonica responds with appropriately moody breaks, just right for a blues which is more tender in spirit than blues generally are.

**GOIN' BACK HOME.** A persistent theme in Smoky's repertoire of blues is nostalgia for the farm country of Mississippi, for his mother, sisters, and brothers who are still there. In actuality Smoky goes home seldom and stays only a few days when he does. Apparently he feels that he can't return to the old way of life, though his ties with his family are still strong.

*(Harry Oster-1960)*

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## HERMAN E. JOHNSON

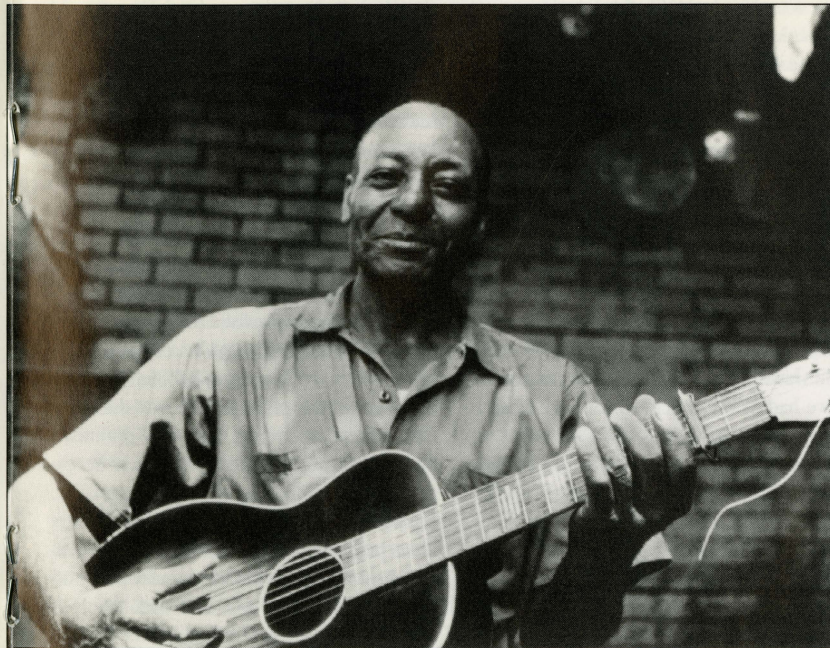
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**S**peaking of his own experience, Herman E. Johnson of Scotlandville, Louisiana, summed up in eloquent words what had been the formative roots of most gifted blues singers.

"I had a good religious mother, a good religious father; they both was members of the Baptist Church. I have one brother an' one sister, an' they is members of the Baptist Church, an' apparently I was the on'iest jack (maverick)

of the family. I don't belong to any church.

"So my life was just that way, to keep out of trouble, drink my little whiskey, an' go an' do little ugly things like that, but just in a cue-tee (quiet) way. An' in 19 an' 27 I taken up the habit of playin' the guitar, an' I imagine it must have been the good Lord give me the talent to compose things. An' durin' those times, I was raisin' cotton, plowin' the mule. From that, milkin' in milk dairies, from that, driftin' on to



*Herman E. Johnson*

Photo by Harry Oster



larger cities, workin' on barge lines where there was ship docks, workin' at scrap metal companies, where we was handlin' iron eight hours each day, from that, on construction jobs, an' then we worked pourin' concrete an' whatsoever other things was necessary. We did this until it ranned out. We run another industry then, the Solvay Process; we worked there in those chemical things like that; then we would leave home again, pick up quite an experience on our guitar.

"But sometime' we would cut sugar cane in the winter months, such as we could to get a dollar. The times was hard for a poor man. Didn't have the education to afford a better job, so we had to use it manually an' we worked through many hard trials. We endured many things we didn't want to endure, but that was our on'iest way for subsistences. So we made it on up till now.

"...So all these things we add them together, an' you can see that my life has been a degraded life, but in spite of all those things, whatever the Lord holds in his stock for you, that will be yours one day, an' I'm plannin' for the future one day to have a better life than I'ze had." (Taped June 12, 1961.)

Thus Herman was raised in a religious

environment but was not a member of any church. Since he was steeped in the language of religion, having been exposed to it intensely in his formative years, he drew readily on religious imagery in his songs. He also made the traditional sharp demarcation between holy music, appropriate to believers, and sinful songs, singers of which are destined for hell.

Leading a wandering existence in his earlier years, pursuing jobs in an orbit which fluctuated ceaselessly between country and city, he picked up a rich experience which he expressed in the blues he improvised to the accompaniment of his guitar. Although he recognized that he had been living a degraded life, that hard trials are the lot of those with no education, nevertheless his overall view was optimistic and affirmative, a philosophy which he expressed in his blues. In all these respects Mr. Johnson was typical of most old-time country blues performers. As Richard Wright has written, most blues "are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope." (Foreword to Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, London, 1960, p. IX.)

**I JUST KEEPS ON WANTIN' YOU.** "Had a little female difficulty, cause me to compose this little thing, but after all we won't discuss that, that's the cause o' me composin' it, a little female difficulty. Another guy gettin' between me an' my little female, cause me to want a little bit; I'm gonna pull the trigger if you won't do better."

**YOU DON'T KNOW MY MIND.** The song deftly and wittily paints a sad and at the same time amusing picture of the archetypal Woody Allen of bluesdom, the unhappy victim of female injustice who pokes fun at his own plight, taking some of the sting out of his suffering by turning the joke on himself.

*I served my little woman sweet jelly roll,  
Took the shoes off my feet, an' put me in col',  
Man, you don't know, you don't know my min',*

*Chorus: But when you see me laughin',  
That's just to keep from cryin'.  
I asked my little woman,  
Could she stand to see me cry,  
Told me, "Why heck yes,  
I can stand to see you die," etc.,*

*Got a handful o' nickels,  
Pocketful o' dimes,  
Houseful o' children,  
Neither one of them is mine, etc.,*

Odum and Johnson (Negro Workaday Songs, Chapel Hill, 1926, p. 210) wrote that a variant of this song was sung by Left Wing Gordon, who would use the chorus as a wandering stanza, and readily fit it into many different songs, also that "numerous vulgar versions of the same title were current among Negroes long before the formal song was published." Herman Johnson's performance is a folk variant of the first recording of the song, by Virginia Liston, "You Don't Know My Mind," OK 81344, New York City, 1923. Among numerous other recordings are those by Clara Smith, Columbia, New York, 1923; Barbecue Bob (Robert Hicks), Columbia, Atlanta; Tampa Red, Bluebird, Chicago, 1936.

**MOTHERLESS CHILDREN** is a variant of Blind Willie Johnson's "Mother's Children Have a Hard Time," recorded by Columbia in Dallas, 1927, issued on various labels. Herman carries on the traditional practice of Blind Willie of leaving out words and letting the guitar speak for the singer. Herman, who holds the guitar flat on his lap, uses an open tuning and slides the back of a small pocket knife (with the blade closed) on the strings to stop them, with frequent glissandi from note to note and much tremolo, the same general technique as Blind



Willie. As he does with every song he learned from tradition, Herman has filtered it through his personality and feelings; the result is one of the most moving performances on record.

**DEPRESSION BLUES.** After working for fifteen years as a laborer for the big Esso refinery in Baton Rouge, La., an exalted job for a Black in the deep South, Herman was suddenly fired. Hunting desperately for a job, he experienced the difficulties memorably described in "Depression Blues." He finally got a Civil Service position as a janitor at Southern University, a black school in Scotlandville, La., and still held the same job at the time these tapes were made in 1961. About his new job, Herman felt that although he liked working indoors out of the weather, he found it impossible to get along on \$30 a week take-home pay he received from Southern.

**SHE'S A-LOOKIN' FOR ME.** A knife blade performance marked by Herman's usual artistry in maintaining a subtly nuanced dialogue between himself and his guitar in which the two are equal partners in a conversation rather than a soloist and an accompaniment.

**SHE HAD BEEN DRINKING.** Although he is here using the archaic practice of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Willie Johnson (com-

mon in folk circles at the time they were recording) of omitting words or portions of lines and letting the guitar complete what was said, his guitar this time is electrically amplified with the strings tuned quite low; the result is a novel sound reminiscent of an agile double bass engaged in an elephantine dance, indicative of Herman's continued growth as an artist.

**I'M GROWING OLDER** effectively captures the pathos of an aging lover trying to hold onto a younger woman with wandering impulses. In the context of the song as a whole, the seventh stanza is a fantasy of wish fulfillment or a memory of an earlier and happier past:

*I got a gal, man, I got a gal, man,  
An' she's tall as a cypress,  
She's tall as a cypress tree.  
An' she walk through the rain,  
Cold weather, just to be with me.*

**PO' BOY** is perhaps one of the most widely known traditional blues heard in the South and many recordings of the song were commercially issued. Herman plays the song in the traditional manner using a knife blade.

**LEAVIN' BLUES** with electric guitar. The search for work, boredom, wanderlust, and disappointment in love are among the motives

in blues for hitting the highway. As suggested by Herman's autobiographical statement earlier in these notes, his life has been full of wandering from job to job, like most blues singers. Here in "Leavin' Blues" the urge for fresh far away places expresses itself in a striking fantasy of speed in the traditional poetic hyperbole, "I'll eat my breakfast here, eat my supper in Mexico."

**PIANO BLUES.** Folk associations with the piano are vividly evoked by an interview with Willie B. Thomas, a folk performer from the same area as Herman. Willie remarked: "What a piano blues comes from, long time ago befo' the piano blues came out, we used to play these jazz bands, we had 'em on the plantation, mos'

every plantation had its band, but after the whiskey went out, then you couldn't drink this liquor free like you could befo', an' then... we had the bootlegger slippin' in the alley, so we had a piano joint; we played the piano, an' that's where these blues come from, in the same time.

**WHERE THE MANSION'S PREPARED FOR ME** with knife blade guitar. This is a good example of the traditional blues singer's being at home with spirituals though he is technically no longer one of the saved. The idiom of religion is still a ready part of his creative musical vocabulary as suggested by Herman's statement.

*(Notes by Dr. Harry Oster — 1972)*

*Producer's note: Mr. Johnson retired in 1970 from his job due to a stroke from which he never recovered and he died on February 2, 1975.*

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