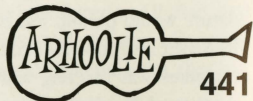


# MISSISSIPPI FRED McDOWELL

*"This Ain't No Rock N' Roll"*



1. MY BABY (Walter Jacobs)
2. LEVEE CAMP BLUES
3. WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN
4. DIAMOND RING
5. DANKIN'S FARM
6. YOU AIN'T TREATIN' ME RIGHT
7. ETHEL MAE BLUES
8. MEET ME DOWN IN FROGGY BOTTOM
9. MAMA SAID I'M CRAZY
10. I HEARD SOMEBODY CALLING ME
11. KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED  
AND BURNING
12. I WONDER WHAT HAVE  
I DONE WRONG
13. I WORKED OLD LU AND I WORKED  
OLD BESS
14. JIM, STEAM KILLED LULA
15. WORRIED NOW, WON'T BE  
WORRIED LONG
16. GOING AWAY, WON'T BE GONE LONG
17. GOING DOWN THAT GRAVEL BOTTOM
18. BYE, BYE LITTLE GIRL

*Total time: 77:15*

**Fred McDowell - vocals and electric guitar**

# 1 - 8: recorded August 19, 20, & 21, 1969 at Sierra Sound Studios with Mike Russo - second guitar, John Kahn - bass, & Bob Jones - drums. (Previously available on Arhoolie LP 1046.)

# 9 - 18: recorded one evening in March of 1968 at Chris Strachwitz's house in Berkeley with John Francis - drums (and probably Steve Talbot-harmonica on # 9). All previously unissued.

All photos © by Chris Strachwitz.

Produced by Chris Strachwitz.

Cover design by Dix Bruce & Tom Diamant.

Unless otherwise noted, all songs composed or arranged by Fred McDowell and © by Tradition Music Co. / Bug Music (BMI)

***Other recordings available on Arhoolie:***

304- "You Got to Move-Mississippi Delta Blues"

*Fred's classic first LP and more.*

424- "Good Morning Little School Girl"

*Includes 13 previously unissued.*

Copyright © & © 1969 & 1995 by Arhoolie Productions Inc.

MISSISSIPPI

# Fred McDowell

*"THIS AIN'T No  
Rock N' Roll"*







*Fred McDowell with Mike Russo*

Photo: © Chris Strachwitz

## MISSISSIPPI FRED McDOWELL

*"This Ain't No Rock N' Roll"*

One of the most significant achievements of the urban folk music boom that began in the late 1950s and ran uninterrupted through the next two decades was its concerted effort at seeking out the living practitioners of the older musical styles of the American countryside. While the major focus of these activities concerned itself with the rediscovery of those veteran performers who had made records during the so-called golden age of location recording—the ten-year period from 1925-35, when the leading recording firms of the day sent mobile recording units into the southern U.S. to document regional musics—a number of previously unknown performers in these older styles came to light as well.

Chief among the newly found representatives of the art of country blues were two men, both singer-guitarists of uncommon artistry and individuality, Robert Pete Williams, of Louisiana, and Fred McDowell, Tennessee-born but stylistically a Mississippi Delta bluesman. By virtue of their striking command of,

and true originality of expression within the conventions of the rural blues, Williams and McDowell have taken their rightful place among the very first ranks of traditional blues artists.

Born in Rossville, Tenn., about 1905, McDowell became interested in music in his teens, when he first turned his attention to the guitar. He had been trying to master the instrument only a few years when in 1926 he moved to Memphis, where he pursued a variety of jobs. He continued his efforts at music there too but was seriously handicapped by the lack of a guitar of his own. He got his first instrument shortly before moving to Mississippi in 1940 and it is scarcely surprising that his music should reflect such a strong Mississippi Delta cast, since it was there that he really developed, refined and deepened his musical skills.

For most of his life there he played at a wide variety of social functions in the countryside near his home in Como, meeting a large number of local bluesmen and assimilating their music into his own highly distinctive approach.



By the time he was discovered by folklorist Alan Lomax in 1959, McDowell was very much his own man and, in fact, one of the most significant masters of country blues to have emerged since the mid-1930s. This and his previous Arhoolie recordings demonstrate beautifully just why he was so highly regarded by fans of the undiluted country blues of his adopted state.

The most immediately impressive feature of his music is his guitar playing, one of the most inventive, gripping, sensitive and rhythmically incisive bottleneck styles to be heard on record. His command of the idiom was literally without parallel in the blues, for he had developed an approach which was both unique and wholly brilliant in design and execution. Playing in the open-chord tunings favored by country guitarists, McDowell supports his dark-hued, melancholy singing with rhythmic patterns of great tensile strength, subtlety and resilience. Having set a rhythmic figure in motion, he creates tension by shifting suddenly to a contrasting pattern either beneath or in answer to his sung lines, just as suddenly returning to the original figure, all the while creating a rhythmic impetus that is the very epitome of supple, insinuating swing.

His singular instrumental proficiency aside, McDowell is a strong and persuasive singer in the best traditions of the country blues. He is no great composer of original songs but is instead, like all traditional folk singers, an interpreter who draws on a vast body of commonplace songs, verses, themes and motifs for the substance of his largely improvised music, bringing them together in the heat of his performances, realigning them into new permutations and thus making the familiar fresh and exciting. His songs are best viewed as fluid, dynamic creations that change spontaneously from one performance to the next rather than as fixed, immutable compositions. "Meet Me Down In Froggy Bottom" is a perfect example of this traditional process, having been created during the recording session as a result of a disturbing long-distance telephone conversation Fred had had with his wife earlier that day.

At the time this album was recorded in 1969 (and 1968) it represented a significant departure for Fred, for here he was heard for the first time in an entire program of performances with electric guitar and with the support of a small group. Now, to counter the objections of "purists"—even at this late date—it should be pointed out that Fred had been playing the

amplified instrument heard here for several years, both at the country parties and dances he then played around Como and at the Sunday morning church services at which he and the Hunter's Chapel Singers performed weekly.

Mention should be made, too, of the firm, sensitive backing he is furnished by second guitarist Mike Russo, bassist John Kahn and drummer Bob Jones, which complements and extends McDowell's vocal and instrumental lines perfectly, adding new dimensions of rhythmic interest and textural coloration. And more than just a little bit of excitement too. Fred was fortunate in his choice of accompanists and, in fact, it was he who suggested using guitarist Russo, whom he had met and performed with while on an engagement in Seattle. Their rapport is uncanny, given the cultural and age gap separating the two (actually no apology is needed, as a listen to their eight performances will readily attest). Kahn and Jones were at the time well-known young San Francisco musicians who had worked in a wide variety of musical contexts, always admirably.

And on top of all this, Fred is heard in an entirely new program of material—from old traditional pieces remembered from his early years ("Levee Camp Blues," "Diamond Ring," and

"Dankin's Farm," for examples), on to his personal adaptations of more recent recorded pieces ("My Baby" is Fred's version of the Little Walter hit of the mid-1950s), the spiritual "When The Saints Go Marching In" and on to the extemporized song about his wife mentioned above.

To expand this late 1969 album to acceptable playing length for a 1995 CD, Arhoolie Records owner Chris Strachwitz has dipped into his tape archives and come up with ten further recordings he made with Fred McDowell in his Berkeley Hills home some 17 months before the group performances that made up Arhoolie LP 1046 (tracks 1-8 here). Nor are these mere random additions to that album. No, what makes these previously unissued performances so compatible with the later studio recordings is the fact that Fred plays amplified guitar on both sets of recordings and underpins his robust singing and playing with the support of drummer John Francis on "I Heard Somebody Calling Me" and the venerable spiritual "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning" and, on "Mama Said I'm Crazy"—Fred's personalized and largely extemporized reworking of the traditional blues theme "Worried Blues" ("You Ain't Treating Me Right" is another version)—the deft, probing harmonica of (prob-



ably) Steve Talbot.

For the balance of the performances from this earlier recording session Fred accompanies himself on the amplified instrument. The song materials, as on the group performances of a year-and-a-half later, nine traditional motifs—"I Wonder What Have I Done Wrong" and "Worried Now, Won't Be Worried Long" as well as the muleskinner's lament "I Worked Old Lu And I Worked Old Bess" (which reminds us of just how much of Fred's life was spent in farming and related activities), offer additional examples of his distinctive, robust reshapings of recorded pieces ("Going Away, Won't Be Gone Long" is his version of "Train I Ride," while "Going Down That Gravel Bottom" is his recasting of the song nexus "Brownsville Blues/Diving Duck/Down That Gravel Road" and "Bye, Bye Little Girl," with its gradually accelerating tempo, is his adaptation of "Sail On").

The two sets of performances fit together neatly. In fact, the informal recordings Chris made in his living room might almost be considered earlier versions of, or even a rehearsal for the more structured quartet performances of a year-and-a-half later. Looser, more spontaneous, with only minimum preparation, they show us Fred in a transitional stage to the more

cohesive group he introduced on LP 1046. And no apology need be made for their shortcomings; with Fred so clearly at the helm, they had none.

Come to that, what Fred was doing in these performances was akin to what Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker and other Mississippi bluesmen of his generation had done a quarter of a century earlier when, guitars revved up to the max through electric amplification, they made the traditional blues of their native state into the modern electric blues and set the music on a whole new course of development. Fred, on the other hand, living in isolation for so long and rarely venturing outside Como, saw no reason to amplify his guitar, which he played solely for friends and neighbors in his immediate home area, much as his forebears had been doing for several generations. All this began to change when Lomax visited and recorded him in 1959 and his fame spread, via records, ever more widely afield.

By the time these recordings were made Fred had been performing on the blues/folksong "revival" circuit for half a dozen years, had begun to travel widely, made a host of new friends throughout the U.S. and Europe and, as much as his natural humility and unassuming

nature would permit, was basking in the enthusiastic reception his deeply gripping country blues was meeting with everywhere he performed. Fired by and in response to this, he was dipping ever deeper into the music of his youth and early years, recalling songs he hadn't played or even heard in decades, as a means of adding to his repertoire of song and keeping his performances fresh and exciting for his listeners.

Then too, guys like Chris, myself and a few others who Fred had known for just about all the time he was active on the blues circuit, who visited with him in Como and with whom he stayed on his trips to Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and elsewhere—well, we were constantly prodding him to dredge up old songs, interviewing him, asking him questions about his life and musical experiences. Students of the music, we were interested in what he could tell us, and we wanted—always we wanted—new songs from him.

Some of us, Chris and myself for example, were recording him on an ongoing basis and had need of new repertoire for his albums. I know that every time Fred stayed with me, I made it a point to see if I could work with him to bring as many old songs to the fore as time permitted. And these, happily, he shared with his audiences as he began to integrate them into his normal performance repertoire. There's lots of them here too; in fact, most of this album consists of material that was then newly added to Fred's quiver of songs.

If you've not heard Fred before, you're in for a rare treat. And if you're already a fan of his music, you'll take the greatest pleasure in gaining such a generous portion of new, unfamiliar songs that will add significantly to your appreciation of his artistry. As far as that goes, one can never have enough Fred McDowell in his record collection. And I know I'm not the only one who feels that way.

*(Pete Welding-1995)*

---

*Down Home Music Since 1960:*

Blues • Cajun • Tex-Mex • Zydeco • Country • Jazz • Regional & World Music.

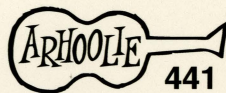
For our complete 116-page illustrated catalog of CDs, Cassettes, Videos, & more, send \$2.00 to:

**ARHOOLIE CATALOG, 10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530**



# MISSISSIPPI FRED McDOWELL

*This Ain't No Rock N' Roll*



1. MY BABY (*Walter Jacobs*)
2. LEVEE CAMP BLUES
3. WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN
4. DIAMOND RING
5. DANKIN'S FARM
6. YOU AIN'T TREATIN' ME RIGHT
7. ETHEL MAE BLUES
8. MEET ME DOWN IN FROGGY BOTTOM
9. MAMA SAID I'M CRAZY
10. I HEARD SOMEBODY CALLING ME
11. KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED  
AND BURNING
12. I WONDER WHAT HAVE I DONE WRONG
13. I WORKED OLD LU AND I WORKED  
OLD BESS
14. JIM, STEAM KILLED LULA
15. WORRIED NOW, WON'T BE WORRIED LONG
16. GOING AWAY, WON'T BE GONE LONG
17. GOING DOWN THAT GRAVEL BOTTOM
18. BYE, BYE LITTLE GIRL

*Total time: 77:15*

## Fred McDowell - vocals and electric guitar

# 1 - 8: recorded August 19, 20, & 21, 1969 at Sierra Sound Studios with Mike Russo - second guitar, John Kahn - bass, & Bob Jones - drums. Previously available as Arhoolie LP 1046.

# 9 - 18: recorded one evening in March of 1968 at Chris Strachwitz's house with John Francis - drums (and probably Steve Talbot-harmonica on #9). Previously unissued.

All photos © by Chris Strachwitz.

Produced by Chris Strachwitz.

Cover design by Dix Bruce & Tom Diamant.

Unless otherwise noted, all songs composed or arranged by Fred McDowell and © by Tradition Music Co. / Bug Music (BMI)

Copyright © & © 1969 & 1995  
by Arhoolie Productions Inc.



9629-70441-2

