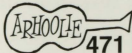


# JOHN JACKSON

## Country Blues & Ditties

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25. WHY I QUIT PLAYING GUITAR (story)

JOHN JACKSON - vocals & guitar or banjo

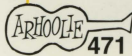


All songs arranged by John Jackson  
Recorded by Chris Strachwitz  
Edited by Tom Diamant & Chris Strachwitz  
Graphic design by The Peanut butter Kid  
Cover photo © by Chris Strachwitz

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# JOHN JACKSON

## Country Blues & Ditties





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In this, the last year of the 20th century, a time of instant communications, mega corporations telling people around the globe what to eat, wear, and listen to by their ever-more pervasive slick advertisements and productions in ever-more media, as well as harder and louder electric sounds inundating our fragile senses, it is hard to realize that the gentle, lilting, old timey acoustic guitar and banjo sounds and the strong, deep, soulful voice of a songster like John Jackson can still be heard. If you are lucky you can catch John in person at your favorite folk festival or local coffee house or just enjoy his recordings. John's music represents a fascinating blend of rural songs and dance tunes he heard well over half a century ago growing up as a young African American farm hand in the isolated Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, intermingled with what he

remembers of the records by both black and white artists which he heard on the radio or which became treasured artifacts in the Jackson home.

The seventh son born to black tenant farmers Suttie and Hattie Jackson in Woodville, Rappahannock County, Virginia on February 25, 1924, John has been a farmer, butler, chauffeur, historian, grave digger, humanitarian and musician. Helping to raise thirteen siblings, as well as his own family, working for \$3 a day, John finally realized that in order to make a life for himself, he would have to move someplace where opportunities were more abundant. In 1950 John, his wife and children came to Fairfax, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C., where he soon found work as a caretaker, cook, and chauffeur. To augment his income John would also dig graves which became his full time occupation in the 1960s.

Having played music as a hobby for house parties most of his life (with a ten year interruption in the 50s), John was asked to come over to a gas station in Fairfax one day in 1964 by the owner who also happened to be a banjo player. They were hoping to have a little jam session when a Fairfax neighbor, Chuck Perdue, stopped by to fill his tank with gas. Chuck noticed the man standing there with his guitar and asked him if he could play. Shy man as he is, John said: "I only know a couple of chords – and I can't sing at all" but proceeded to play fine versions of "**Candy Man**" and "**Matchbox Blues**." The word soon got around what a fine country blues man was living right close to Washington and John was soon invited to play at local concerts and coffee houses.

During the 1960s a very broad interest in roots music was developing, especially among young college students on the East and West coasts. The Blues in particular were very appealing and of special interest not only to young white Americans, but perhaps even more so to Europeans who were keen to play their own version of this powerful African-American music.

The result was the soon to come, so-called British Invasion – of rock and roll from England – especially at the hands of the Rolling Stones. In April of 1965 I happened to be in Washington, D.C. with Texas songster and bluesman, Mance Lipscomb, who made the very first album to appear on my Arhoolie label. Mance had a gig at the Ontario Place and John Jackson was asked to play a few songs. Geologist, now folklorist, Chuck Perdue and by that time a good friend of the Jacksons, was in Florida at the time but his wife Nan introduced me to John. I was delighted to meet him and was pleasantly surprised by John's marvelous music and warm personality. Nan wasn't quite sure if they should agree to let me record John Jackson since there were several similar record firms documenting this type of music. I guess we all got along pretty well from the start and the very next day we met again at John's house in Fairfax and I made the first recordings, including tracks 1-10 and track 25 on this CD. I was driving across the country and had my big Magnecord recorder in the trunk of my car.



The sources for John's music are varied. John's father played guitar and banjo and sang blues and other types of songs and according to John, "could be heard for miles when he hollered!" John's mother sang hymns and played harmonica and accordion until her husband burned the squeeze box! John started on his father's guitar when he was about four years old. A few years later his father bought a used record player and the records became the prime source of much of John's repertoire. John's ear was phenomenal for learning both songs and stories. Dances, field hollers, house parties and church singing were of course another fundamental component of the music John grew up with. He also learned songs, open tuning, and knife style guitar technique from a fellow named "Happy" who worked as a waterboy on a nearby road gang. But the old records which the family members bought from a traveling salesman, were John's main objective. Instead of sounding like the records, he turned them into personal interpretations. Blind Blake ("**Diddy Wa Diddy**") was one of John's favorite artists, so was Blind Lemon Jefferson ("**Matchbox Blues**"), Jimmie Rodgers ("**T.B. Blues**," "**Waiting For A Train**" etc.) and Blind Boy Fuller ("**Screaming And Crying**"). He often didn't know if the singers were black or white and he didn't care. If the music



sounded good to him, John would try to sing and play it. "**I'll Step Aside**" was a huge hit for country artist Ernest Tubbs and the Delmore Brothers were no doubt the model for John's version of "**Lay Down My Old Guitar**."

Selling albums by little known rural blues singers has not been a high profit business but I have enjoyed every minute of meeting and recording remarkable personalities. Although limited in distribution, I have survived as a small independent little minnow in the vast ocean of big fish. After releasing John Jackson's first album a year after recording it, I went back in December of 1967, joined by Mike Seeger, to make some more recordings, including **cuts #11 through 19** on this CD. John began to appear at more and more public venues. In the fall of 1969 I was asked by German promoter, the late Horst Lippman, to put together that year's American Folk Blues Festival. The annual package tour made appearances in most western European countries including England, Germany, Holland, France, and Italy – all at major concert halls. Since Mance Lipscomb was not well enough to travel, I was delighted to take John Jackson to represent the older, almost pre-blues African-American traditions. Joining John on that fall's tour were Chicago blues stars Earl Hooker and Magic Sam, zydeco giants Clifton and Cleveland Chenier,



pianist Alex Moore, one-man band and poet Juke Boy Bonner, harmonica ace Carey Bell along with bassist Mac Thompson and drummer Robert St. Judy. While in Stuttgart, Germany we had the chance to spend a few hours in a fine studio and I once again recorded John Jackson (as well as Alex Moore) including **cuts # 20 through 24**, which resulted in John's third LP album for Arhoolie Records.

Since then John Jackson has toured widely and visited many countries and in turn has enjoyed friends and visitors from far and wide. In 1972 and 1982 John recorded two albums for the Rounder label and in 1986 he was awarded the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship. That same year

Renato Tonelli released a fine half hour video film entitled: John Jackson – An American Songster, which is now available as Rhapsody Video # 8013. In 1992 Arhoolie released John's first CD: "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down" with 26 selections also drawn from the three sessions noted above (Arhoolie CD 378). If you are interested in playing some of John's music yourself, may we suggest the 86 page Mel Bay song book by the same title which brings you all 25 guitar pieces from CD 378 transcribed by Lenny Carlson – omitting only the banjo piece. For bookings or other information please contact John's manager, Trish Byerly at (703) 641-5818.

Chris Strachwitz - Feb.1999



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# JOHN JACKSON

## Country Blues & Ditties

John has been a farmer, butler, chauffeur, historian, grave digger, humanitarian and a musician. His music represents a fascinating blend of rural songs and dance tunes he heard well over half a century ago growing up as a young African American farm hand in the isolated Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Presented here is a collection of blues, breakdowns, rags and country songs – simple, raw and played straight from the heart.

**JOHN JACKSON** - vocals & guitar or banjo

All songs arranged by **John Jackson**

Recorded by Chris Strachwitz

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