

# *The BEST of* Mance Lipscomb

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4. Long Tall Girl Got Stuck On Me
5. Joe Turner Killed a Man
6. Willie Poor Boy
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19. Run, Sinner, Run
20. Angel Child
21. Blues in the Bottle
22. Texas Blues

Transcriptions of the songs are found embedded in the disc and can be accessed on your computer.

Mance Lipscomb – guitar & vocals

On #20 & 21: Frank Lipscomb – bass,

Wayne Davis – drums

All compositions and/or arrangements by  
Mance Lipscomb

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All selections previously released on Arhoolie  
CDs 306, 398, 465, 482 and 9026

Recorded and produced by Chris Strachwitz

Notes edited by Haley Ausserer

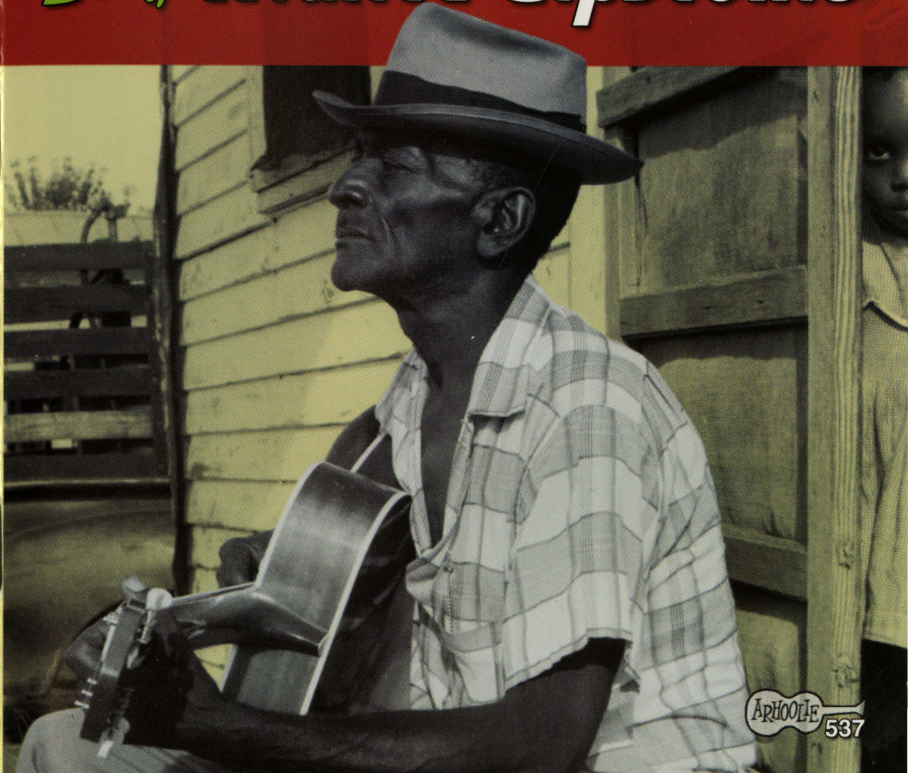
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# *The BEST of* Mance Lipscomb





# Meeting Mance Lipscomb

In 1960, during my summer vacation from teaching at Los Gatos High School, I drove my old car to Texas with a cheap tape recorder, an EV-664 microphone and a guitar in hopes of recording Lightning Hopkins in the beer joint where I had first heard him play live the previous summer. I had met Lightning Hopkins after receiving a postcard from my friend, Sam Charters, telling me that he had found Lightning in Houston, Texas! At that time most jazz fans and followers of “folk music” frowned condescendingly upon blues singers as commercial Rhythm & Blues artists. No one knew much about them or their whereabouts, except for the people in their own neighborhoods and a few “record men” who captured their music and issued them on commercial discs. Lightning’s records, which I had heard on Hunter Hancock’s and Jumpin’ George’s R&B radio programs in the

1950s, had totally captivated me. When I finally heard Lightning in person in his own down-home surroundings, I was overwhelmed by his ferocious delivery and incredible improvising ability.

Upon my arrival in Houston, muggy and hot as usual for that time of year, my host, Mack McCormick informed me that to my chagrin Lightning was leaving the next day with John Lomax Jr. for California to perform at the Ashgrove in Los Angeles and at the UC Berkeley Folk Festival! Although I was terribly disappointed, Mack said that since I had a car and a tape recorder but very little money, we should drive out into the country where he was sure we could find blues singers similar to my idol. Mack suggested we head towards Grimes County. I recall stopping along the highway and going up to the fence around a field where workers were



Mance Lipscomb and Chris Strachwitz





chopping cotton. One or two came over to inquire as to what we wanted and I asked them if they “knew of any good guitar pickers in these parts.” They were a bit bewildered but one of them said that we should go to Navasota for that. We were actually headed in that direction, as apparently Mack had some inkling that the Mr. Moore about whom Lightning had recorded a powerful protest song on a Gold Star 78 rpm disc, might actually be a real person with a real plantation.

Once we arrived in Navasota, Mack, who seemed amazingly well informed about anything Texan, suggested I stop at the nearest feed store since they would know everyone in town. As we walked into the first such store we saw, Mack bluntly asked, “Does Tom Moore live in this town?” One of the men tending the store somewhat indignantly replied, “Yes, *Mister* Moore sure does and his office is right over there in the bank building.” Mack got on the phone and soon we were in Tom Moore’s nice office. In hindsight

I believe all these people had no idea who we were, but since Mack acted rather gruff they might have thought we were federal police agents. Several years later I found out that Tom Moore had been prosecuted in federal court for violating the civil rights of one of his workers. Mack asked to visit Mr. Moore’s plantation, but we were told to make an appointment for that. Then Mack simply asked if Mr. Moore knew of any workers or local musicians who would play for dances or other socials. He said yes, there is such a fellow in town whom the people seem to like. He told us to go the railroad station and ask Peg Leg as to his name and whereabouts. After departing, we quickly located the only peg-legged man at the station and he told us, “Yes, that’s Mance Lipscomb” and showed us where we could find him – either at his house or on the highway cutting grass. We first went to his house and were told he was not in but we might find him along the highway. We tried, but could not locate him, and finally returned

to his house that evening. There we met Mance Lipscomb, a soft spoken, kind, polite and agreeable person. When Mack asked Mance if we could hear him play, he said yes, and we were soon invited into his shotgun house on Washington Street. I brought in my guitar since Mance did not have one, and as he began to play and sing it became evident that we had stumbled on a rather remarkable songster. We had brought along some beer, and I soon started my tape recorder. As I recall, Mance first sang “Shine on Harvest Moon” and told us that white folks usually liked that one! But soon Mack was asking about all kinds of songs, including the one about Tom Moore. Upon hearing that, Mance replied, “Oh, you want the real stuff?” That evening we recorded 23 selections, including most of the songs which later that year I issued as the first Arhoolie LP (#1001, *Texas Sharecropper and Songster*). This was, at Mack’s suggestion, the beginning of Arhoolie Records.

*Chris Strachwitz – October 2009*



# Mance Lipscomb (1895-1976)

Nearly fifty years have gone by since that muggy Texas summer day in 1960 when Chris Strachwitz and Mack McCormick drove out from Houston through the bottomlands of the Brazos River in search of a musician who might sound a little something like Lightning Hopkins. What they found in Mance Lipscomb — in addition to the soft spoken, gracious and kind gentleman so many have described — was not the ferocious blues improviser Chris had in mind, but rather one of the last songsters of his generation. They found a great bearer of tradition who had never made a commercial record, but was for more than four decades among the most outstanding musicians in and around his hometown of Navasota.

Songster was a word Mance preferred. It suggested a performer who held a wide variety of songs and styles at

his command. In the words of Mack McCormick, a songster is “a musician who is both performer and inventor and harks back to the time when every Southern town had its songster, a man who was virtually in charge of the community’s social life.” (liner notes to Arhoolie LP 1001)

Mance played ballads, rags, reels, breakdowns, pop songs, children’s songs, spirituals, waltzes, foxtrots, one-steps, two-steps, ballin’ the jack, heel-and-toe polka, the cakewalk, the Charleston, the buzzard lope, slow drag, hucklebuck and blues. Some of those rhythms were more or less suited to black or white audiences. Mance could play to both. It was his job to keep the crowd dancing, even when that meant playing straight through from Saturday night to eleven o’clock Sunday morning. Maybe especially then.

Mance Lipscomb was born in Brazos

County on April 9, 1895. His father, born a slave in Alabama, was a professional fiddler who taught himself to play on a cigar box instrument he made as a boy. Mance’s mother was part Choctaw, and had a voice more powerful, he remembered, than his own. Music ran in the family. Young Mance never took to fiddle or the five-string banjo his uncle played, but found early on that the guitar suited his inherited ability to pick up songs by ear. As a child he learned to accompany his father at local dances. Soon, due in part to his father’s frequent absence from home, Mance started playing those dances on his own. For the same reason, he began to farm full-time to help support his mother and siblings.

Hard work was an element of Mance’s life from early childhood. The whole family chopped cotton along the Brazos River. By his own recollection, he was picking fifty pounds per day by the age of ten or eleven. Before long that number doubled, then doubled again.





"He'll shove the limit up, as years come around," Mance told folklorist Glen Alyn. "That landowner don't let you slack off with nothing, man." (*I Say Me For A Parable*, p.66)

When he was sixteen, Mance started sharecropping. The terms under which he worked were exacting, the earnings out of his control. Plantation owners — who set market prices — provided mules, plows, groceries and fees, and took half of the total harvest. Later, when Mance was able to supply his own mule and plow, the plantation took every third bale of cotton and every fourth load of corn. In either case, when it came time each year for the final accounting, the farmer found himself in debt or at best with a small profit. It was a system designed to keep people down.

Music provided a means of escape, and Saturday night dances provided the black community with a place that was free of restriction. And if one of those dances, or suppers as they were also called, was going on anywhere near Navasota, there was a

good chance Mance Lipscomb had been hired to supply the entertainment. He described the scene to writer Pete Welding:

"The way they arranged those dances then, they'd kill hogs and chickens and turkeys and have apples and peanuts and candy, and they'd come there and dance all night and they'd buy and eat. They'd sell that whole hog out, I don't care how large it was. They'd have it at somebody's house and you would dance there all night till you give out. They had gamblers all 'round the house, all out in the grounds and in cribs when it was too bad to set outdoors. There was two or three hundred people there... You give one tonight and the next night somebody else'd give one. I was the only guitar player and they wouldn't have no strain in getting me to play from one to the other." (liner notes to Arhoolie CD 465)

By his own telling, Mance could sit down in a chair and play continuously all night long while the party raged around him. By shifting keys he was able to keep

his hands from getting tired; by moving into songs that he could perform in his sleep, he was maybe even able to catch something like a little shuteye.

On Friday and Sunday evenings, Mance played for white dances and barbecues where he could earn ten or twenty dollars compared to the five or six he made on Saturday night. He played a different set of songs for the white folks — more waltzes, two-steps and polkas — but the principle was the same: play what they wanted for as long as they wanted. If that meant staying on until midnight or one, that's what he would do. Come Monday morning he'd be up with the four o'clock work bell and standing in the field behind his mules and plow by dawn.

That was how Mance lived for the better part of fifty years. Six days of farming, three nights of entertaining. He was also a family man. In 1913 he married his wife and lifelong partner Elnora. Together they would raise twenty-three children: one of their own, three of his late sister's,

fourteen grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. "Looks like everybody around me calls me Daddy Mance," he says in Les Blank's beautiful film *A Well Spent Life*. "I ain't everybody's daddy, but I treat 'em just like I was their daddy."

Maybe that's why he rarely wandered far from Navasota. For most of his working life he stuck to the tri-county area of Grimes, Brazos and Washington counties. There were a few years early on in his marriage and adulthood when successive floods drowned the local crops and drove him to find work picking cotton as far away as Dallas (where, on many occasions, he was able to hear the great Texas songster Blind Lemon Jefferson playing on the street). But that was as far as he would travel for most of his life.

In 1956, frustrated by more than four decades of working in debt, Mance decided to make a break for nearby Houston. There his fortune turned on an accident he suffered while working for a lumber

company. The settlement was enough to afford a small house and three acres of land back home on the outskirts of Navasota. And that's where he was, working for a contractor cutting grass along the state highway, when Chris and Mack turned up asking if he knew any songs.

The next decade of Mance's life would look quite different from the first six and a half. Not long after that fateful visit, an LP arrived in the mail: *Mance Lipscomb: Texas Sharecropper and Songster*. It was recorded, as Chris relates above, at Mance's house the very night they met him, and would be the first of seven released on the Arhoolie label during his lifetime.

Some months later a letter arrived inviting him to perform at the 1961 Berkeley Folk Festival. With a little hesitation, no doubt softened by the money being promised, he accepted. It was the first of many such appearances all over the country as Mance would go on to become a favorite of the growing base of new young fans of traditional music.

Mance reflected back on that experience in *A Well Spent Life*:

"At 75 years of age I'm seeing ten years of my life that I wouldn't have seen hadn't have been for the young people. Appreciated me and communicating with me, set down at my house and having fun with me. I'm enjoying that. I don't have to work hard no more. This year makes eleven years I've done had it pretty easy. Only thing I kind of have it hard is getting up and down the road different places going to these places where I play at. But I done got used to that now.

"Oh yeah, I experienced a lot of things. That's what I go out for. You know, learn the ways of people and the reaction of the folks and how to get along with people. Now, I met some nice people and met some bad people. So I went through with both of 'em, the bad and good. And I haven't had no trouble out of nobody in the whole twenty-four states I've been in. And I believe I've got a lot of friends around the places where I've been."

Mance Lipscomb died in Navasota on January 30, 1976, leaving behind a rich legacy of musical and cultural traditions reaching back at least to his own childhood. The twenty-two songs on

this CD represent the best of what Chris was able to capture on tape during his fifteen-year friendship with this generous, charming, and talented man.

*Adam Machado – October 2009*

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#### Also available from Arhoolie Records

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##### *Texas Songster* – CD 306

The first Arhoolie album plus more. A definitive classic.

##### *You Got To Reap What You Sow* – CD 398

Texas Songster Volume two features more of Mance's versatile repertoire.

##### *Captain, Captain!* – CD 465

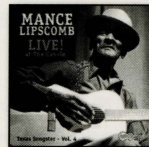
From sessions in 1960 in Texas and 1966 in California.

##### *Live! at the Cabale* – CD 482

Recorded live at the famous Cabale.

##### *Texas Country Blues* – CD 9026

Mance Lipscomb will continue to enchant listeners for generations to come.




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Mance was in his own words primarily "a sharecropper and songster" who, after a week of hard work in the fields, would supply the music for both blacks and whites at various weekend social gatherings in and around his hometown of Navasota, Texas. He sang and played the blues as part of his vast repertoire, which included the full range of popular music of his era in that rural part of central Texas. These 22 songs, selected by Arhoolie Records founder Chris Strachwitz, give a glimpse into the unique talent of Mance Lipscomb.



**CD 537**

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FILE UNDER BLUES

