

# JOHNIE LEWIS

*"Alabama Slide Guitar"*



1. HOBO BLUES
2. HE MET ME ON A THURSDAY MORNING
3. UNCLE SAM AIN'T NO WOMAN
4. CAN'T HARDLY GET ALONG
5. MY LITTLE GAL (\*)
6. NORTH CAROLINA BLUES
7. I'M GONNA QUIT MY BABY
8. BABY, LISTEN TO ME HOWL
9. YOU GONNA MISS ME  
(About Dr. Martin Luther King)
10. MISTAKE IN LIFE  
(Handsome Stranger)
11. I GOT TO CLIMB A HIGH MOUNTAIN  
(About Dr. Martin Luther King)
12. MY MOTHER OFTEN TOLD ME
13. LEWIS' LITTLE GIRL DONE STOLE  
A BLACK CAT BONE
14. JUMPIN' JIVE
15. POOR BOY
16. GUITAR BLUES  
(Hound Dogs on My Track)

17. COMB MY BABY'S HAIR
18. OH LORD, TELL ME RIGHT  
FROM WRONG

*Total time: 59:00*

**Johnie Lewis** – vocals and guitar /  
harmonica on #13 and kazoo on #14

**Charlie Musselwhite**  
– harmonica on (\*)

All songs by Johnie Lewis. © by Tradition Music Co.  
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Produced by Chris Strachwitz  
Session #1: selections 7-12, 14-18 recorded by  
John Steiner in Chicago, Ill., on August 13, 1970,  
with Chris Strachwitz supervising.  
Session #2: selections 1-6, 13 recorded by  
Leon Kelert in Chicago, Ill., on January 9, 1971  
with Charlie Musselwhite supervising.

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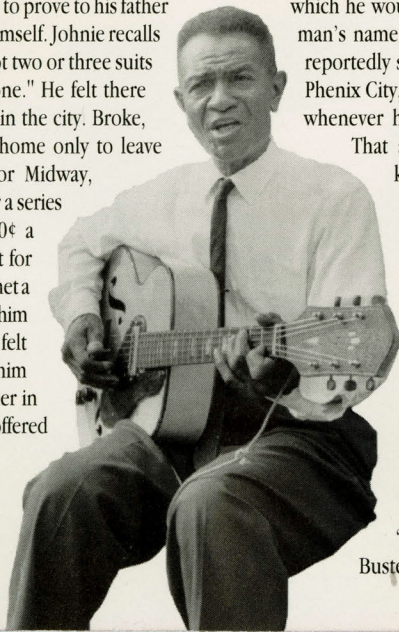
Johnie Lewis was born on October 8, 1908 on a farm near Eufaula, Alabama—just south of Montgomery. He first left home when he was about fourteen in order to prove to his father that he could care for himself. Johnie recalls having a friend who "got two or three suits a year and I only got one." He felt there must be a better living in the city. Broke, Johnie soon returned home only to leave again the next year for Midway, Alabama. He worked for a series of people starting at 30¢ a day. In the 1920s he left for Morrison, Al. where he met a Mr. Mitchell who offered him \$2 a day. All along he felt that God was leading him on. Eventually his brother in law contacted him and offered him \$2.50 per day.

Johnie started playing guitar and singing the blues as the result of two

incidents when he was in his late teens. He was in Columbus, Georgia when he met a man making iron buckets who also had a guitar

which he would play upon request. The man's name was Charlie Grant and he reportedly still lives across the river in Phenix City, Alabama. Johnie visits him whenever he goes back down south.

That afternoon Johnie couldn't keep his mind off a young nurse who liked the way Charlie Grant played the song about "so cold up north that the birds can hardly sing" and he told himself: "Lord, if you let me live, I'm goin' to learn to play me a guitar." The following Monday he went to a pawnshop and bought his first guitar for \$15. In about a week he could play "The Water Pipe Done Busted" and soon "Baby, Listen



To Me Howl." That was the positive experience which made him into a musician, but unfortunately there were other experiences which made him sing the blues.

would see your people no more. I actually cried—but the good part won out. But I was feeling so bad and that's what got me to singing the blues!"

*"Lord, if you let me live, I'm goin' to learn to play me a guitar."*

*—Johnie Lewis*

About that time Johnie was once again looking for work, and although he had never done any painting, he bought a paint brush on impulse. He met a white lady who needed someone to paint her kitchen. This being his first paint job, he used too much turpentine and the job turned out rather messy! However the lady was nice enough to pay him the promised \$5 and gave him something to eat.

"I was sitting in her kitchen when her husband came home and wanted to know what I was doing in the kitchen eating—he told me to step out on the back porch. I was used to it at that time although now I wouldn't do it—I'm not crawling now—but at that time I was crawling! He started cussing me when he saw what I done to the kitchen and he snatched the \$5 the lady had given me right out of my hand. I got a real bad feeling and almost went to get my pistol. One mind told me to get the gun and take care of him but the other mind told me, no, you never

In 1933 Johnie went to Georgia and married his wife Odessa Lewis. Although playing occasionally for house parties and for himself, he made his living mainly by painting (no doubt with less turpentine!) and doing yard work or most anything he could find. He was generally earning \$15 per week which in those years of the Great Depression was a decent living. One day Johnie had to defend himself which got him into trouble with the law. He first went back to Alabama but soon decided to leave the South for good. He called relatives in Chicago and they told him to come on up. Leaving his wife behind for the time being, Johnie took a Greyhound bus north. While the bus made a stop in Nashville, Tennessee, Johnie got out his guitar and played for some people who began to gather on the sidewalk. Soon the police approached and everyone ran off but him.

"What's the matter with your feet, boy, that you can't run?" But I told the officer that I feel I

am a citizen—I was born here in the United States—I don't have no rabbit blood in me—so I don't see why I got to run—I'm not doing anything wrong. 'But you are playing that guitar and you got the street blocked.' Then they asked where I was from but before I answered that I played them this song:

*I'm scared to stay here  
I'm scared to leave this town  
Cause the police is staying  
On every corner in town*

and they started enjoying it and giving me money too and called the people back! The bus was leaving but the people were giving me so much money that I caught one the next day."

Tampa Red, Barbecue Bob and Blind Lemon Jefferson were Johnnie's favorites when he was learning to play guitar with a slide. He didn't learn to pick with his fingers until much later when he saw T-Bone Walker one night in Columbus, Georgia. Since his arrival in Chicago Johnnie has played in various small clubs including a two year stint in a club at the corner of 40th and Indiana. He met Tampa Red at the H & T Lounge and met many of the other Chicago blues singers. Johnnie also took up dancing which he learned from the late Stovepipe who was almost an institution on

Maxwell Street's outdoor bazaar. He once lost a dance contest to John and Grace Brim because as he put it, "I didn't know no music." He also met such blues stars as Memphis Minnie, Tommy McClennon, Muddy Waters, and Howling Wolf.

"I have a book here where I wrote a lot of songs—course I got a lot of tunes by hearing other people and I change and write my words and if the tune wasn't right I'd change it." So Johnnie's songs are a rich combination of his own imagination and traditional blues. In "He Met Me On A Thursday Morning" Johnnie recalls his encounter with God. He feels that most conversions today don't amount to much but back in the times when he grew up, people had powerful experiences. Two songs are about the late and much admired Dr. Martin Luther King: "You Gonna Miss Me" and "I Got To Climb A High Mountain." Others like "Hobo Blues" and "North Carolina Blues" are his interpretations of traditional blues standards.

But music has always been a side-line with Johnnie. Within a year after his arrival in Chicago, Johnnie sent for his wife. In Chicago he started by painting a store for a man on approval, that is he didn't ask for pay unless his work was good. Through this first satisfied customer Johnnie Lewis was soon known as an expert painter and work became plentiful. Johnnie



became his own boss and he had a book filled with over 100 names of satisfied customers with whom he could get in touch in case they need some painting done. It is through this work that Johnnie Lewis became known to the Cokliss family whose son Harley was making a film about blues in Chicago. Harley soon discovered that Johnnie was not only a good painter but quite a remarkable singer and guitarist as well. And that is how he came to be featured in the film "The Chicago Blues." (1970, Irit Films Ltd. - 25 Milman St. - London NW6EG).

Paul Oliver, the well known British blues authority, saw a preview of the film in London and wrote to me about how impressed he was with Johnnie Lewis. When I met Paul again at the Ann Arbor Blues Festival in the summer of 1970, I finalized my plans to record Johnnie Lewis and the next week I stopped off in Chicago to do the first session on August 13 with John Steiner as the engineer. About five months later I asked Charlie Musselwhite to supervise a second session which was held on

January 9, 1971 with Leon Kelert as engineer. This CD contains the best selections from both of these sessions. (Some of this material appeared previously as Arhoolie LP 1055.)

Thanks to Paul Garon and Jim O. Neal who conducted an interview with Johnnie Lewis upon which most of these notes are based. And thanks to John Steiner, Leon Kelert, and Charlie Musselwhite for helping with the recordings. We used to send annual royalty checks to Johnnie Lewis, small ones unfortunately since the LP never did sell well, but we always received grateful letters from Mr. Lewis. The last letter we have from him dated March 23, 1991 was unfortunately a request to stop sending him a check "because the Social Security people are taking every penny I get." We have since lost touch with Johnnie and our efforts to find him have failed. If anyone has any information on his whereabouts, please contact us at Arhoolie Records.

(Chris Strachwitz—1971/revised in 1997)

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**File Under: Blues**



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