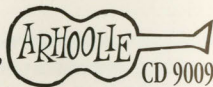


# SAM MCGEE

*"Grand Dad of the Country Guitar Pickers"*



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17. WAYFARING STRANGER

**Sam McGee**—vocals, guitar,  
banjo, and banjo-guitar  
**Clifton McGee**—second guitar  
**Goldie Stewart**—bass.

Recorded and edited by Mike Seeger  
Recorded in Franklin, Tenn., in November  
1969 and October 1970.

Recording equipment kindly loaned by the  
Newport Folk Foundation.

Special thanks to Fuller Arnold who helped  
in all stages of production of this recording.

Cover photo by Mike Seeger.  
Produced by Mike Seeger and Chris  
Strachwitz  
Cover design: Wayne Pope & Dix Bruce

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# SAM McGEE

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## *"Grand Dad of the Country Guitar Pickers"*

The development of guitar styles was of central importance in the evolution of southern country music in the twentieth century. The introduction of the guitar to rural southern music brought the capability of playing a wider variety of musics which included urban popular music of all kinds, country blues and hot guitar (largely of African American origin), and gospel song in addition to the older traditional songs and banjo-fiddle music. The 1900s were a period of great creation of and experimentation with guitar styles which led to a less regional and more widely popular rural based music.

Sam McGee is one of the first of the hot country guitar players and is certainly the first to record (on Vocalion in 1926), broadcast (about the same year over WSM's "Opry") and perform on road shows. His repertoire included a good cross-section of country guitar music: parlor guitar ("Franklin's Blues"), hot guitar ("Buck Dancer's Choice"), and blues

("Railroad Blues"). His importance lies not only in his creativity and technical skill but also in the fact that he gained access to the mass media at a time when southern guitar playing was in its early formative stage.

Sam McGee was born May 1, 1894, in the 11th District of Williamson County, Tennessee (near Franklin), son of John F. and Mary E. (Truett) McGee. He was raised on a farm and commenced guitar picking at about age 12. His style had pretty well formed by 1910 or 1915. Sam worked mostly as a blacksmith and also farming. Music had always been a sideline. Sam McGee continued to appear on the Grand Ole Opry every Saturday night until his death on August 21, 1975, at age 81, as the result of a tragic tractor accident. He played a guitar solo each night as well as accompanying one of the string bands and meeting with and playing for old time fans and friends backstage.

It is the aim of this CD to present a good

cross section of Sam McGee's repertoire including waltzes, sentimental songs and tunes, old and new popular tunes, blues, blues ballads, fiddle tunes, hot guitar pieces, comic songs, gospel tunes, parlor guitar tunes and a turn of the century rag. It is too bad that this recording can't tell you more of 'Mr. Sam' (as

his really close friends called him). One could nearly always find him with a twinkle in his eye, quiet (and perhaps bashful) and a natural cut-up at the most unexpected time. This along with his greatly talented and individualistic guitar picking won him as many friends as fans, including this writer.

*(Mike Seeger—1971)*

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### *Excerpts from a conversation between Sam McGee, Fuller Arnold and Mike Seeger, November 30, 1969:*

SM: "My dad played fiddle, my uncle played fiddle and banjo. Just kind of a musical family... The first thing I ever played was a banjo, a five dollar banjo... I was about ten years old..."

"I'd never heard any particular one (guitar player) only I'd seen a few (Blacks) who would pick that-a-way you know... they were all ages nearly... most of them played with one finger and a thumb and I thought if that was a good way, to better add on another finger..."

"Of course I'd done been a-playing a good while before I'd ever particularly seen anybody

play much. There wasn't much music in the country like they are now, just a little hillbilly style music played in one another's homes and things like that and little square dances. But there was none of these long-haired musicians is what I call them, you know, read it all off of books. What we play ain't wrote down in books.

"We lived out here at a little place three miles and a half from Franklin, called Perry, and my dad run a little store out there and that's where I seen most of these (Blacks) play and dance, you know. Some of them would



pat and some would dance and sometime they'd have an old piece of a guitar and they'd pick that... And some of the stuff I kind of liked and I'd try to play it. And did play...

"The first time I seen (Uncle Dave Macon) it was in Franklin, playing the court-house yard. He had his banjo, throwing it around, singing, cutting up, passing the hat. And I went back home and I was telling my wife and all the people, 'Well, I've seen the funniest old man today I've ever seen in my life—Uncle Dave Macon playing the banjo.'

"But then it wasn't too awful long 'til Uncle Dave Macon came up to our school and put on entertainment. Where I lived there joined the school house yard. So I went over to the show that night and of course I wanted to get Uncle Dave, and Sid Harkreader with him, I wanted them to spend the night with me. I went up and invited them after the show was over to come and spend the night with me. Uncle Dave says, 'Yes, be glad to.' And Uncle Dave had on his banjo case 'Uncle Dave Macon, World's Greatest Banjoist.' And Fiddling Sid Harkreader had on his fiddle case 'Fiddling

Sid Harkreader, World's Greatest Violinist.' Well, that sounded so big to me I was mighty near afraid to look at them. I thought maybe they were; I hadn't been nowhere, seen no better..."

FA: "How old were you when Uncle Dave Macon came by and thought you ought to quit shoeing mules and travel with him?"

SM: "It was about 1918, somewhere right in along there... I had that old guitar and it was all scratched up and setting over in the corner... and he happened to look at it—we were just sitting around the fire talking—and he looked over there and seen that old guitar sitting over there and says, 'I see you've got a guitar sitting over there; can you play?' And I says, 'Well, I can play a little bit.' And he says, 'Well, I'd like to hear you play a tune.' So, 'Missouri Waltz' was pretty popular at that time and I played the 'Missouri Waltz' for him and he said that was the first tune he ever heard picked out on the guitar. And he wanted to know if I'd consider going with him to play some dates. I said 'Yeah, when I get caught up.' I thought I had to do everything anybody wanted me to and they had a little work piled up. All work and no

money. And so he said, 'Well, I'll make us two weeks' dates and we'll see what we can do.' So he made them two weeks' dates and played them up and he said, 'Well, what about just teaming up. We'll get us a car and we'll play some.' And I said, 'We'll try...'

"So we was playing down in Alabama, just everywhere we could go in a T-model car, was what it was. So we was down in Alabama playing some schools and a fellow heard of us being out there and come to see us. He said, 'Well we're going to have a big fiddler's contest and banjo and guitar contest at Birmingham; we'd like to have you all in it.' Says, 'You stand a chance to maybe win something and see a lot of people. Uncle Dave says, 'That'll be fine.' So we entered the contest and that's where I won the first prize (banjo) over Uncle Dave... He told me not to tell it. Said it'd hurt him which maybe it would..."

"(We played) ... big high schools mostly... We'd take a day off and go around and make these dates ourself. Go to the schools and most of the time play for the kids there and tell them when we'd be back. That's all you had to do and you'd fill the

house. Not a stick of advertising. But now you have to have all kinds of advertising, newspapers, windowcards and everything and a whole regiment to go with you... But then all you had to have was two to fill a house... there wasn't any competition."

MS: "Uncle Dave said he'd never heard anyone play a tune on the guitar before."

SM: "Lead the air. Pick the melody. They'd second (accompany) and sing just like they do in this day and time, most of them. Second and sing. You just watch television and there'll be one guitar player and singer right after another nearly. They'll have a band behind them, backing them up... I've always tried to play so that these basses come on in almost like a second with it."

MS: "Did you play the tunes the same then as when you first recorded?"

SM: "About the same as I play now nearly—a little longer... I never changed it."

FA: "I'll tell you I heard him the first time to really remember him about thirty-five years ago at Harper's School and he was putting on a show and playing the banjo and he played about the same stuff as he does now other than he played 'Old Black Joe'

on his cowbells that he hammered out and tuned himself being a blacksmith..."

SM: "Well, I try to play anything that comes up nearly..."

MS: "Are there any songs you learned

from your father or mother?"

SM: "No, that's where I made a mistake. I didn't think too much about those songs at that time, because I was always looking for something else..."

## *The Tunes:*

1. **Sam McGee Stomp**-Starts out with "I Don't Love Nobody" and ends with tune put together by Sam in the late sixties.

2. **Fuller Blues**-Composed by Sam McGee about 1930 and named for his friend Fuller Arnold.

3. **Burglar Bold**-learned from Uncle Dave Macon about 1930.

4. **Dew Drop**-Learned in about 1969 from Burt Hutchison who used to play it about 40 years ago. Hutchison presently (1969) plays with Herman Crook's band on the Opry. This tune is typical of those from the parlor tradition.

5. **Jesse James**-Three finger yet not Blue Grass instrumental version of this well-known outlaw ballad. Five-string banjo.

6. **Ching Chong**-Early 1900s popular song

about a Chinese man from San Francisco. Learned about 1925 from wife's sister-in-law who played and sang it with piano. Played here on same banjo-guitar as one used with Uncle Dave Macon in the twenties.

7. **Blackberry Blossom**-An old fiddle tune played in a style he has used for at least 55 years. Learned from fiddling Arthur Smith.

8. **Wheels**- "Just heard it over the radio and I liked it and it just stayed with me and I got to playing it. I don't know whose it is."

9. **How Great Thou Art**-Well-known gospel song.

10. **When the Wagon Was New**-Learned from visitor from Illinois in the 1930s.

11. **Franklin Blues**-Learned from Dr. John Merrill of whom he says: "I'd be going to school, walking across from one highway to another..."

and he'd watch for me when I'd come on back and I was just a little old bashful boy. I mean I was really bashful. But he liked to hear me play. He'd come to the door and he'd make me come on in. And I'd go in and play for him... and he would say 'that little devil can beat me playing my own tune.' And I've been playing it for years... I didn't know the name of it, I just call it the 'Franklin Blues.'"

12. **Penitentiary Blues**-Learned from a record in the 1940s.

13. **Pig Ankle Rag**-Learned from 'Slim' Smith who used to visit Sam.

14. **Railroad Blues**-Composed by Sam McGee.

15. **Buck Dancer's Choice**-Composed by Sam McGee. This is his best known tune played here on banjo-guitar. Included are all parts plus an introduction which used to be

part of the tune remembered by chance at Oct. 1970 session. During one section tune is played in 'stop time': "(The buck dancer) wants you to stop and he does the rest with his feet."

16. **Black Mountain Rag**-Sam McGee's version of this popular fiddle tune.

17. **Wayfaring Stranger**-Well-known spiritual song.

*For further biographical information see: "Sam & Kirk McGee," SING OUT, November 1964, Vol.14/ No. 5 as well as the following excellent books on Country Music: "The Country Music Story," by Robert Shelton and Burt Goldblatt (Bobbs-Merrill Co., New York, 1966) "Blacks, Whites, and Blues," by Tony Russell (Studio Vista, Ltd., London, 1970, and Stein & Day, New York)*

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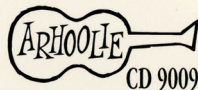
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**File Under: Country/Folk**

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