

Juke Boy Bonner

Ghetto Poet

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2. THE ANIMAL GAP
3. TIME TO SAY GOODBYE
4. BLUES FOR ELMO
5. IF I SOUND LOWDOWN
6. SPORTSMAN'S LUCK
7. CALIFORNIA HERE I COME
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9. GETTING UP FROM THE GROUND
10. HOUSTON BEAT
11. WHAT WILL I TELL THE CHILDREN
12. ALL THE LONELY DAYS
13. CHILDHOOD DREAMS
14. SETTIN' THE RECORD STRAIGHT
15. RAININ' IN MY ROOM
16. LET ME RUN IT DOWN TO YOU
17. I DON'T GO FOR GAMES
18. IT'S ENOUGH

All selections composed by Weldon Bonner and © by Tradition
Music Co. c/o BUG Music Co. – Hollywood, Ca.

Photos of Juke Boy Bonner by Chris Strachwitz

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Produced by Chris Strachwitz

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11: recorded at ACA
studios in Houston, Tx.
on 12/20/1967

3 & 10: recorded at ACA
in Houston, Tx. on
11/31/1968 with Alvin J.
Simon – drums

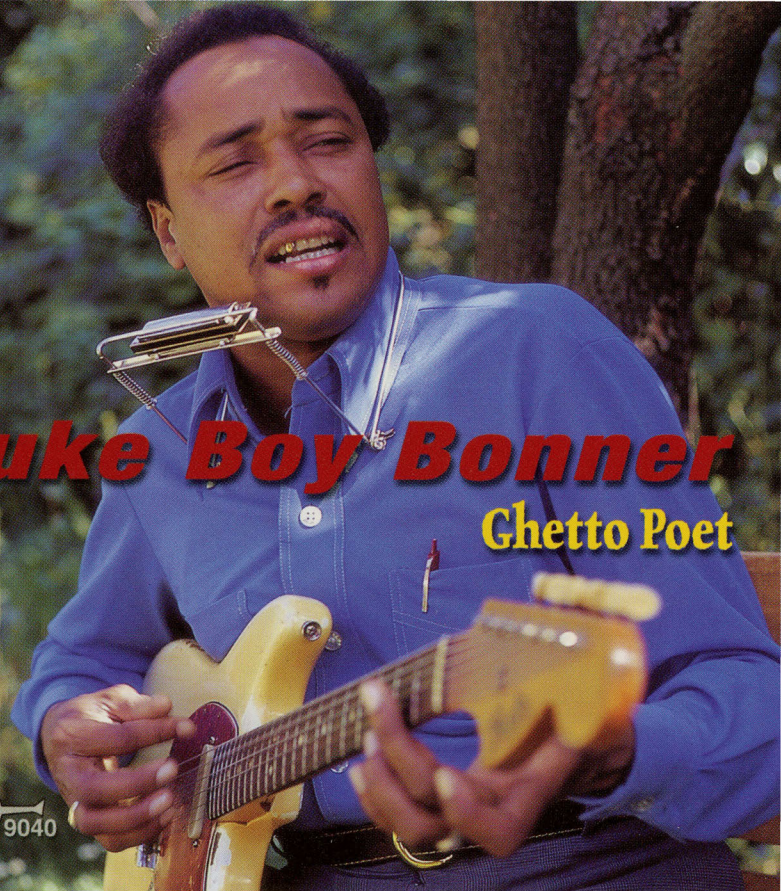
1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14,
16, 17, & 18: recorded
at ACA in Houston, Tx.
on 5/5/1969

2 & 7: recorded in
Berkeley, Ca. on
7/19/1971

13 & 15: recorded at
radio station KPFT in
Houston, Tx. on
5/14/1974

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Juke Boy Bonner *Ghetto Poet*

Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner (May 22, 1932 – June 29, 1978) was not only a remarkable blues poet who spoke from his heart and true life experiences but also an emotional, honest, dedicated and totally authentic singer of the blues. Most so-called "Blues singers" who gained fame, if not always fortune, were primarily entertainers. Although Juke Boy Bonner tried hard to follow in their foot steps and reach a wider audience, he arrived too late to cash in on the blues' popularity among blacks, and he died just before the blues' current popularity exploded amongst white audiences. As a true poet Juke Boy was primarily interested in rendering to listeners his own creations although he spent much of his time as a performer covering other artists' hits since his own material simply was not available on the juke boxes or on the radio and thus not familiar to his audiences. Juke Boy's idol, Lightning Hopkins, on the other hand, achieved first considerable local and eventually international acclaim, largely due to a

constant stream of recordings which were well distributed, first regionally and later around the world.

As a child Weldon Bonner barely survived the Great Depression in rural southeast Texas where he was born. His father was a sharecropper who died when Weldon, the last of nine children, was one year old. His mother was unable to feed the child and Weldon was taken in by an elderly couple. Hard times were all around and eventually music became his only avenue of escape. As a teenager he won a talent contest at the Lincoln Theatre shortly after arriving in Houston in the late 1940s. As a result he was granted a regular 15 minute radio program sponsored by local record store owner, Henry Atlas. But since he had no records of his own on the market, Weldon Bonner, with his guitar and a racked harmonica around his neck, found himself covering mostly the latest juke box Blues hits at local juke joints. He soon became known as "Juke Boy" Bonner in certain of Houston's wards

where fellow rural expatriates congregated.

It seems Juke Boy was born for bad luck. His most unhappy period was probably when his wife left him and he was solely responsible for raising his three children whom he adored and educated. The only girl, Debra, today receives her father's royalties and any other funds derived from Weldon Bonner's music. During the 1950s Juke Boy drifted to California where he made his first but unsuccessful record. Then back to Texas and over to Louisiana where he made a few more sides. Some of his poems were published in the Forward Times, a black Houston weekly where he became a regular feature. Another low point in Weldon's life came the same day President Kennedy was shot down in Dallas, Texas, as he lay in Houston's Ben Taub Hospital recovering from surgeons having removed 45% of his stomach due to chronic ulcers.

In 1967 Juke Boy Bonner was "discovered" for the outside world by British blues enthusiast and writer, the late Mike Leadbetter who recorded Juke Boy and released his first album on the

English **Flyright** label. I heard about Juke Boy later that year and recorded his first album for release here in the US. The big blues wave was beginning to spread and Juke Boy got to make his first trip to Europe in 1969 with the annual American Folk Blues Festival. That year I was asked to put the program together by the two German sponsors, Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau. In the early 1960s these two promoters put the whole blues wave into gear by showing the world that this once frowned upon, low class, or drunkard's music, was actually one of America's great vernacular art forms and could be successfully presented in concert halls all over Europe and on its own terms and in its raw and authentic form.

Unfortunately back in Houston the old country blues were no longer in demand by this time and the jobs for blues singers got slimmer and slimmer. For Juke Boy a few more trips to Europe became reality as well as occasional concert appearances and tours in the US. Arhoolie released a second album and more followed on various labels but

with failing health Juke Boy seemed to be on a downward slide. Tragically by the time I saw Juke Boy Bonner for the last time in Houston, he was working at a dreadful minimum wage job: unloading chickens at a processing or killing plant. I shall never forget the bad shape Juke Boy was in while working at this depressing job which saw truck load after truck load of chickens arrive. Small cages were stacked on top of each other, all containing creatures which had never seen daylight, never could fly, could hardly walk, and had been factory fed and stuffed all their short lives.

Here then is the last testament of a fine poet, a fine blues singer, a man who was haunted by bad luck all his life. He was a kind and sensitive person who became slowly more and more embittered by the hopelessness of his situation. I had never issued these sides

during his life time, partially because it was hard to sell the two albums I did release on Arhoolie Records (note Arhoolie CD 375 – JUKE BOY BONNER: “Life Gave Me A Dirty Deal”) which I felt contained his strongest songs and performances. As I went back to listen to the unissued tapes however, I discovered that the session on May 5, 1969, resulted in some very fine performances and songs. To these we added a few more previously unreleased selections from various times when we got together. Juke Boy always needed money and he always had a bunch of new songs. I hope you will enjoy these personal snapshots of a truly remarkable vernacular poet who was desperately trying to be a success all his life – truly a real blues man!

(Chris Strachwitz – August 2003)

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