

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2374



Roscoe Holcomb

Close To Home

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SIDE 1

1. Motherless Children (w/guitar)
2. Mississippi Heavy Water Blues (w/guitar)
3. Train That Carried My Girl From Town
(w/guitar)
4. Milk Cow Blues (banjo instr.)
5. Frankie & Johnny (w/guitar)
6. In London City (w/banjo)

Recorded by John Cohen

SIDE 2

1. Roll On Buddy (w/banjo)
2. Got No Honey Baby Now (w/banjo)
3. Darlin' Cory (w/banjo)
4. The Village Churchyard (unacc.)
5. Walk Around My Bedside (w/guitar)

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CENTER FOR FOLKLIFE PROGRAMS
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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FA 2374
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Recording Roscoe Holcomb - July 1972

"I should have told you that I have a cold, and not to come" was his greeting. However, this was my only opportunity to record him in the more relaxed atmosphere of home. He was anxious and uncertain about his future, both in work and in health. Recent attacks of stomach ulcers had put him on a severe diet and left him frequently in pain. At this point he had been advised by friends and family to stop all attempts to find work, and go onto disability retirement payments. However, he felt that if he did on "disabled" he would never be able to work again. "All my life I've worked, hard work - I don't know what to do when I'm not working". His last job had been building the Interstate Highway which was coming through the mountains. He poured concrete and had gotten stuck in cold water up to his chest - when through an accident his rib was broken and he collapsed on the job. He was on medication for infection of the rib, pills for ulcers. Last year he found out that he had emphysema from his years of work in the saw mills and mines. He still smokes often.

Previous recording sessions with Roscoe in New York City had been Herculean efforts by him, and he would record the total LP in one session, nervous, tight and worried as well as homesick. To record him at home was an attempt to relax this situation. But the worries prevailed. Not that there was ever any doubt on his part about the music. He would dredge up old songs that he hadn't thought of in years. He spent very little time preparing or rehearsing the song - maybe just enough to find the comfortable position of frets and fingers, or working out the tuning that best fits the song. Often he would discover or create a new sound just prior to recording. He might run through a verse singing softly, but once the tape was running he projected the forced, intense voice which has become his trademark. Rarely during recording was there a second take, nor did he have any particular misgivings about 'bobbles' when he missed a note on guitar or banjo. As opposed to any quest for perfection, the recording became a document of the actuality of that moment.

He spoke of the fact that he never had to 'remember' a song, and how the words just came to him as he sings - how one time he will remember verses, another time they fade away. He told of how he'll remember bits of songs from years ago with no recollection of the source. While talking about Blind Lemon Jefferson whose music he admired, he started to play Mississippi Heavy Water Blues, a song known to me through an old blues record by Barbeque Bob. Roscoe never heard of Barbeque Bob, and in the thirteen years I've known Roscoe, he never hinted at knowing this song. Yet suddenly, there he was singing it into the microphone.

He spoke of songs which meant a lot to him, particularly religious songs or those that touch on the difficulties of living. Motherless Children is very close to him - he comments on how it is about the tough time that little kids have growing up in the mountains and in the coal camps. He cherishes a memory of having sung the song in New York, and as he came off the stage a man from the audience "with tears coming down his cheeks" said that he didn't like that song at all.

"Buddy, I didn't sing it for you" said Roscoe, thinking the man was trying to start something.

"Don't get me wrong", says the man, "Nothing the matter with you, it's just that the song is too close to home".

Roscoe talks of singing the Old Baptist Hymn Village Churchyard in the back of a car driving through Berkeley, California - while the other passengers, Rita Weil and Mike Seeger were moved to tears.

And often at performances in the past six years, Roscoe has choked up with emotion while singing on stage. In Michigan he had to stop singing during his performance of the Wandering Boy. The stunned audience broke into applause - they were unprepared to face the reality of a grown man choked with emotion triggered by the sentiments of his own song.

It is worthy of reflection here to consider the function of folk music to those who sing it. At the Michigan performance Roscoe was reading the words to the Wandering Boy from a printed songbook. He had performed this song many times before, both for himself at home, and on several music tours. I recall his 'lining out' this song with Ralph and Carter Stanley together during the 1966 European tour. During the Michigan performance something special moved him. And I get the impression that his performance is not a performance at all, but becomes an actual event for him. There is no rehearsal for the music. He does not 'practice' at home and the instruments seldom come out of their cases from tour to tour. It is as if each time he sings is like the first time he has sung. In this respect, there is a newness in each performance which may account for the intensity and innovative quality of his sound. When he starts a song certain expectations are presumed, yet unknown qualities remain to be seen. To him the place of music seems to lie dormant in his memory, only coming to life at the singing. Often the performance is done in such an incredible vocal range that the struggle to reach notes takes precedence over the thread of literary content.

This personal intensity and identification with the song runs contrary to the stereotyped Appalachian model characterized performance detached from feeling and remote from personal experience, passing on a song exactly as heard before, with the literary content of primary importance.

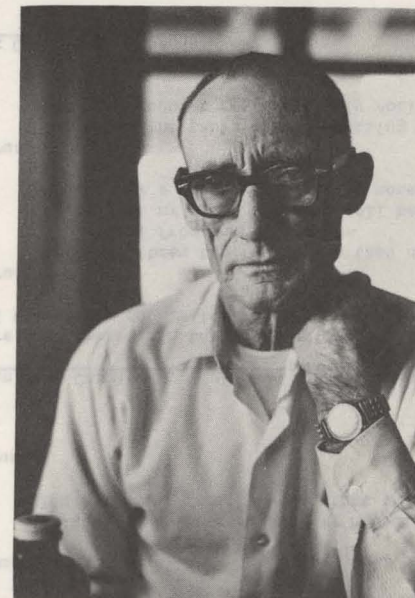
At a workshop at the same Michigan Festival the black fiddler Howard Armstrong (of Martin, Began and Armstrong) commented that Roscoe's music was very pure, and that all other musicians - including Beethoven, Bach, Jazz blues or fiddlers all had tricks and devices which they employed to help communicate their music to an audience,

and that was what their style was all about. But what Roscoe Holcomb was singing was the music without the devices, it was the core of the musical idea and the real spirit of music which was being heard.

At this point I can only presume that this quality is what has made Roscoe Holcomb's music appreciated far beyond the confines of his home, and mountain community, and beyond the limits of the folksong tradition.

Credits:

Recorded, edited and annotated by John Cohen
Cover photo and design, John Cohen
Recording, Blanton Owen
Nagra Tape Recorder from the Friend Of Old Time Music, Inc.
Village Churchyard...recorded by Mark Wilson
Photographs in notes by Carol Reck
Drawing by Dena Schutzer



Motherless Children - voice and guitar

This song is widely sung in Holiness churches throughout the mountains. The Carter Family recorded it in a less bluesy manner.

Mississippi Heavy Water Blues - voice and guitar
probably from Barbeque Bob recording

Train That Carried My Girl From Town - voice and guitar

Probably the initial source for this song is Frank Hutchison's Okeh recording of 1926, although Roscoe has never heard of Hutchison. This is only a fragment which has survived, although fuller versions are still very much in circulation.

Milk Cow Blues - banjo

Although this tune is from a Negro blues-originally recorded by Kokomo Arnold, it is more likely that it came to Roscoe via Sam and Kirk McGee who also recorded it in a more regularized style with a heavy beat. Sam and Kirk lived in Eastern Kentucky for a number of years. Their influence was probably personally felt as much as their recordings were. It is interesting to see how Roscoe has moved the tune into a more-blues-like sound with irregular timing.

Frankie and Johnny - voice and guitar

There are no indications of how this most conventional version of this song got to Roscoe. In the respect that it reflects little change towards the Appalachian sound, gives one the idea that it is from an outside source. Compared to Louise Foreacre's "Frankie Was A Good Girl" (Folkways 2315) which uses a special banjo tuning for this song, Roscoe's tune and text seem to come from the flatlands. One possibility as to source might be the reference to Trenton. Roscoe worked on a truck-farm in southern New Jersey during World War II

In London City - voice and banjo

This is one of the most widespread of the Broadside ballads from British sources. Laws lists over thirty versions - p.260 - of the song collected in America. It is also in the repertoire of Jean Ritchie who was raised about 10 miles from Roscoe's home.

Side II

Roll On Buddy - voice and banjo

This fragment of the song is close to the way that Rufus Crisp of Allen Kentucky sang it as Roll On John (recording not available). It is popular throughout the mountains either under this title or as Nine Pound Hammer, and has been recorded by Frank Elevins, the Monroe Brothers, and Merle Travis. It is still alive today in Bluegrass tradition.

Got No Sugar Baby Now - voice and banjo

Dock Boggs probably was the indirect source for this song, and he is one of the few artists who Roscoe acknowledges as a musician whom he admired. The song was recorded commercially both by Dock Boggs and by Charlie Monroe, although it is widespread in oral tradition as well (see Lundsford - Thirty and One Folk Songs from the Southern Mountains as Red Apple Juice). Perhaps the most curious aspect of Roscoe's version is the constant shift of meaning in his use of the term 'baby' moving in context from girlfriend to infant.

Darlin' Cory - voice and banjo

Judging from the banjo tuning, again Dock Boggs may be a source for this version, however, Roscoe mixes in many verses which are not in Boggs' recording of Country Blues. The prison references are in the Boggs text, but the "thirty miles through the rock" is more likely from Boggs' Danville Girl. The song is also known as Hustling Gamblers and has been recorded by B.F. Shelton, the Monroe Brothers, and Flatt and Scruggs as well.

The Village Churchyard - voice unaccompanied (recorded at Cambridge, Mass. by Mark Wilson at a live performance in November, 1972)

This text is from the New Baptist Song Book (song No. 27), which is used in 'lining out' the words to songs at Old Baptist services in the mountains. Roscoe has played this with banjo accompaniment on occasion. The Stanley Brothers recorded this song on King 750-Old Time Camp Meeting, with full instrumental treatment and a tune like Man of Constant Sorrow. Recently Ralph Stanley recorded it unaccompanied-Old Country Church-Rebel 1508 using the same modul tune which Roscoe uses.

Walk Around My Bedside - voice and guitar

I have only heard this song in Holiness church services in the mountains, and a related version sung by Negroes from South Carolina in 1947. The repetitive chant gives the singer the opportunity to dwell on his every moment of weakness or fear, under the watchful vision of the Lord.



Side I

Motherless Children - voice and guitar

Chorus:

Mother's little children see a hard time when
their mother is dead and gone (2)
They go hungry they go cold, they go begging
from door to door
Mother's little children see a hard time when
their mother is dead and gone.

Father will do the best he can, when their mother she
is gone (2)

Father will do the best he can
But he don't really understand
Mother's little children see a hard time when their
mother is dead and gone.

Chorus:

Mother's little children see a hard time
when their mother is dead and gone
Sister will do the best she can, when their
mother is dead and gone (2)
Sister will do the best she can,
But she really understands
Mother's little children --

Brother will do the best he can, when mother is dead
and gone (2)
Brother will do the best he can
But he don't really understand
Mother's little children see a hard time when their
mother is dead and gone.

Mississippi Heavy Water Blues - voice and guitar

Walking down the levee with my head a-hanging low
Looking for my sweet mama, Lordy she ain't here no more

Chorus:

That's why I'm crying, that's why I'm crying
I've got the Mississippi Heavy Water Blues.
I'm in Louisiana with this mud all in my shoes
And my girl's in Mississippi with those high
water blues

Chorus:

Walking down the road with my hat all in my hand
I'm a looking for the woman that ain't got no man.

Chorus:

Train That Carried My Girl From Town - voice and guitar

There goes that train that carried my girl from town
If I knowed her number I'd sure flag her down

Chorus:

Must have been the fast train that carried my
girl from town
There goes my girl, somebody call her back
'Cause she's got her hand in my money sack

Chorus:

Supper on the table, h'it a getting cold
Some old rounder stole my jelly roll

Milk Cow Blues - banjo

Frankie and Johnny - voice and guitar

Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts, lord how they could
love
Swore to be true to each other, just as true as the stars
above

Chorus:

He was her man, lord lord, but he done her wrong

Frankie went down to the barroom just for a bucket of
beer
She asked that barroom tender, 'has my lovin' Johnny been
here?

Chorus:

He is my man, lord lord, but he done me wrong

Well you oughtn't to ask me no question, and I'll tell
you no lie
Well your lover left here about a half an hour ago with
a girl called Nellie Bligh

Chorus:
He was your man...he's a-doing you wrong

Frankie went down to Trenton, with a little white apron
on
And under that little white apron, she carried a forty
four smokeless gun

Chorus:
She's a-looking for her man...he's a-doing her
wrong

Frankie looked over the transom and she saw to her
surprise
There on the cot sat Johnnie making love to Nellie
Bligh

Chorus:
He is my man...but he's done me wrong

Frankie drew back the kimono and she pulled the little
forty four
Rooty toot toot, three times she shot, right through
that hard wood door

Chorus:
She shot her man...he's a-doing her wrong

Bring around a thousand policemen, bring them around
today
You can lock me down in a dungeon cell and throw the
keys away

Chorus:
Cause I shot my man, lord lord, he's a-doing
me wrong

Frankie said to the warden, what are they going to do?
And the warden he said to Frankie, there's electric
chair for you

Chorus:
Cause you killed your man...that was doing you
wrong

Lord this story it has no tomorrow
And this story has no end
And this story, it just goes to show
That there ain't no good in men

Chorus:
Cause I killed my man...he's a-doing me wrong

In London City - voice and banjo

In London City is where I dwell
It's the butcher boy that I love so well.

He courted me my heart away
And now with me he will not stay

He took a girl in London town
He walked right in and he set right down

He picked this girl up on his knee
And he told to her what he wouldn't tell me

And I can tell you the reason why
It's because she has more gold than I.

Her gold will fade and her silver will fly
And I hope someday she'll be as poor as I

It was late last night when father came home
He was wondering where that his daughter had gone

He went upstairs, to the door he broke
And he found her swinging by a rope

He drew his knife and he cut her down
This was the words in her bosom he found

Go dig my grave both wide and deep
Place a marble at my head and feet

And on my grave place a snow white dove
Just to show this world that I died for love.



Roscoe Holcomb
by D. Schutzu

Side 2

Roll On Buddy - voice and banjo

Oh roll on Buddy, don't you roll so slow
How can I roll when the wheels won't go

Oh roll on buddy, and make your time
I'm broke down, and I can't make mine

Oh roll on buddy, and make your time
The wheels broke down, and I can't make mine.

Got No Sugar Baby Now - voice and banjo

It's who will rock the cradle and who will sing this song
Who will rock the cradle when I'm gone (2)

I will rock the cradle and I will sing the song
I will rock the cradle when you're gone (2)

I've got no use for my red rocking chair
I've got no honey baby now, I've got no sugar baby now

Who will rock the cradle and who will sing this
song
Who will rock my baby when I'm gone, who will
rock the baby when I'm gone

I will rock the cradle and I will sing this song
I'll be good to the baby while you're gone

I got no use for my red rocking chair
I got no honey baby now.

Darlin' Cory - voice and banjo

Wake up, wake up darlin' Cory
What makes you sleep so sound
The highway robbers are coming
They're raging through your town

Last night I lay on my pillow
Tonight I lay on the bed
With the cold prison guards all around me
And the concrete all under my head

It's thirty miles through the rock
Tis sixty to the sand
And I relate to you, the life
Of a many poor married man

It's fifteen cents is all the money I've got
One dollar is all I crave
All I need is a forty four gun
For to put you in your lonesome grave

It's when I'm dead and buried
My friends will be standing around
Place a quart of whiskey on my breast
And watch that poor rounder go down.

Village Churchyard - voice alone

In a dear old village churchyard
I can see a mossy mound
That is where my mother's sleeping
In that cold and silent ground

Gently weeps that weeping willow
Sweet little birds to sing at dawn
I have no one left to love me
Since my mother's dead and gone

I was young but I remember
Well the night my mother died
There I saw her spirit fading
When she called me to her side

Saying darling I must leave you
Angel voices guide you on
Pray that we may meet in heaven
Where your mother's dead and gone

Oft I wander to the churchyard
Flowers to plant with tender care
On the grave of my dear mother
Darkness finds me weeping there.

Looking at the stars above me
Waiting for an early dawn
There by mother I'll be buried
And no more be left alone.

Walk Around My Bedside - voice and guitar

It's walk around my bedside, Lord, walk around (2)
It's walk around my bedside, Lord walk around

When I am sick Lord, walk around (2)
When I am sick, Lord walk around
Walk around my bedside Lord

When I am praying, Lord walk around (2)
When I am praying, Lord walk around
Walk around my bedside Lord

When I am dying, Lord walk around (2)
When I am dying, Lord walk around
Walk around my bedside Lord

Walk around my bedside, please walk around

When I am buried, Lord walk around (2)
When I am buried, Lord walk around,
Walk around my bedside, Lord

Walk around my bedside Lord walk around (2)
Walk around my bedside Lord.



Roscoe Holcomb
in concert

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