

TRADITIONAL BLUES sung by Brownie McGhee Folkways Records FA 2422

VOLUME TWO

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

NOTES BY CHARLES EDWARD SMITH



MUSIC LP
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1630.18
M145
T73
1960
v.2

GOOD MORNING BLUES
DEEP SEA DIVER
DIRTY NO-GOODER BLUES
POOR MAN BLUES
PLEASE DON'T DOG YOUR WOMAN
THE LAST MILE
HARD, HARD TIMES
ST. JAMES INFIRMARY
GRIEV'N HEARTED BLUES
PALLET ON THE FLOOR BLUES

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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Sung by BROWNIE McGHEE
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GOOD MORNING, BLUES

by Charles Edward Smith

"I get up in the morning and I say, 'Good Morning, Blues!' My wife asks me, 'Who you talkin' to?'" -Blues Monologue

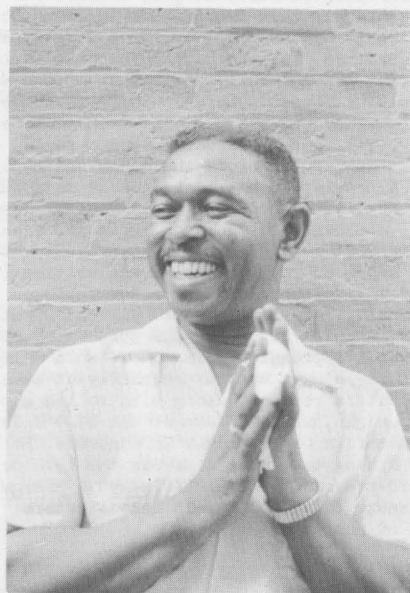
Brownie McGhee's second volume of traditional blues maintains the standard of well-wrought exuberance in song that distinguishes Volume 1 in this series. It has, for the listener, special qualities of its own as well, perhaps most of all in a heightening and maturing of Brownie's particular talents. There is more tension in the swing of this rhythm, a complete naturalness, in the twist of tone in a syllable. Moreover, few singers evoke as forcefully as Brownie the many-sidedness of heritage, the narrative gift of the ballad, echoes of hymns, spirituals, work-songs and minstrels-- sentiment and sex, humor and the solar plexus shots of bitter and broken, worried and lonely blues.

The tunes, from an ever-growing repertoire, are sung in one of the most solid blues voices around and-- those familiar with Brownie's work need not be reminded-- sharing honors with the voice is one of the great guitars of contemporary blues. It has seldom been integrated with voice more sympathetically. For example, the "coda" on Good Morning Blues, a whimsical last word!

Though Brownie's approach to blues is malleable and non-static, it is strongly rooted in tradition. I could begin these notes with much the words used a few years ago in my introduction for "Blues By Brownie McGhee" (FA 2030), an album that has won praise and critical acclaim, quite literally, from Boston to Bombay. The words still make a glove fit:

"Brownie is a natural, unaffected folk singer whose style has gained strength and stature, unobtrusively but steadily. He is a fine folk guitarist, with what Pete Seeger has called a 'wonderful thumb-and-forefinger guitar picking style.' His guitar sings and rings and whangs and talks to you. . . He's sung in cellar taverns and in concert halls, slab-sided churches, roadside bordellos and at leading universities-- singing the way he sang in Tennessee where he first learned the hollers, spirituals, blues and all manner of 'jookin' tunes from his father, George D. McGhee."

When Brownie's Uncle John made him a banjo-- out of an old marshmallow tin, a chunk of seasoned poplar and rosin-rubbed cotton thread-- he added a peg for the fifth string. Tradition was strong in the Tennessee hills! George McGhee's work-hard hands played fine blues guitar and Brownie learned the chords and keys, the fretting and plucking, from him. Later he got a guitar of his own. He left it behind him in 1941 when he inherited Blind Boy Fuller's steel-bodied National guitar. Before he settled down to featuring traditional blues and songs associated with them, he tried his hand at electronically hopped-up guitars that aimed for the juke box sound. Jookin' music was a long ways from home.*



Brownie worked in and in the broader sense, like all blues singers, still is a part of -- what is called in the music trade, Rhythm and Blues. But along the way, there came a turning in the road. The more urbanized singers were beating the time of the country boys, the latter too strongly shaped by tradition to take readily to the slick styles that made the golden records. Fortunately, there was something to take up the slack, though the transition wasn't easy. There were, both because of the interest in jazz and because of a lively enthusiasm for folk music, new audiences for blues. For singers, concerts, hootenannys and, finally, long-play records provided new outlets and a door to new audiences. These audiences wanted least of all a cheapening of the product.

Like the spirituals, the blues were folk-created, though primarily they were for solo voice. Considered in ratio to singers and performances, only a small percentage is memorable, though that looms large in the aggregate of blues and jazz. And for one Ma Rainey there were hundreds, even thousands, of unknown and for the most part, not very talented, blues singers (as in a community where, in the last century, almost all women made patchwork quilts, only a few brought to life old designs and created new ones). It was part of their destiny that Ma Rainey was to sing for all.

What with radio, recordings, ease of travel and population shifts from country to city, changes in relationships between folk and popular music accelerated rapidly, beginning in the 1920's. Topical songs of the South were considered, oftentimes, merely something out of the past, something associated with a way of life one wanted to get away from. So audiences fidgeted with Ma Rainey, at the same time accepting musically negligible singers who had popular status.

*This should not be construed as a commentary on amplification devices. After all, the great jazz guitarist, Charlie Christian, played electric guitar and with it created a linear line of exceptional beauty. But the surface slickness of much amplified guitar, especially in Rhythm and Blues, reminds us of those miracle vegetables, chemically force-fed into seeming abundance-- they have size and color but no meat and no taste! We like Brownie's guitar because, for one thing, he knows where musical sound begins, in a meeting of strings, wood and hands, not in an AC-DC circuit.

The repertoire of young singers, who had been brought up with the blues and spirituals in their ears and in their throats, took on more the characteristics of a slowly urbanized hillbilly that was influenced from popular song (a music largely created for the people) rather than from folk song (a music created largely by the people). If a novelty song was to be created, Yes, We Have No Bananas would be the criteria, not the Boll Weevil song or the Mule-Riding, Talking Blues. There is another change that will not have escaped the readers of these notes. The boll-weevil song was created over a period of time, built out of the blood and bones and hopes and dreams of a people; it has lasted close to a hundred years and may last a hundred more. Yes, We Have No Bananas -- a clever nonsense song that has been recorded in more foreign languages, probably, than any other American popular song -- was written (with an ear for musical phrases long since employed compositionally, as I believe Dr. Sigmund Spaeth disclosed) in quick order for the purpose of hitting the post War I depression market. It sold millions of copies, reaching a built-in senility at an expected early age; it is revived, along with rolled stockings and bathroom gin, when an aura of the 1920's is indicated in a film or TV play. In contrast, Boll Weevil is a song that made sense in the 19th century, to the hard-pressed victims of Plessy vs. Ferguson -- it makes sense today, to sit-in demonstrators, it is that kind of song!

By the 1930's the blues, if they were genuine in their emotional depths, were often dismissed as not being commercial; in that decade, many of Bessie Smith's records -- now standard on long-play -- were out-of-print. With Ma Rainey it was the dated-ness and "down home" character of her non-blues repertoire, and the harsh hard quality of her blues, that lost her her Paramount recording contract. She was the mother of the blues, and deserved this tribute, but no one tried to sign her up. The balance -- the ecology in which the blues had thrived -- had been destroyed. Older blues traditions survived rarely in jazz (e.g. Billie Holiday) more often in honky-tonks and country music. From the latter came some of the very best of today's blues singers -- Brownie, Sonny Terry, Bill Bill, and even that athletic athletic architect of Roll, Muddy Waters.

Their relationship to ballads is often one of the distinctive and enjoyable features of Brownie's blues. In "Blues By Brownie McGhee" he gave us his own original treatment of Good Morning Blues. Since that album's release he has moulded it even more to his own style of singing and given it more of a narrative cast. The present interpretation is warmly sung, an intimate conversation piece in which he speaks to the blues, personally and directly.

Many blues sung by Brownie reflect an essential blues-creating process, the re-arrangement of lyric, which begins with the rhythmic and tonal setting for a word or, as the case may be, even a syllable. An example of lyric re-arrangement is demonstrated in his handling of the lines in the last section of Dirty No Gooders Blues. He does not imitate Bessie Smith, with whom this blues is most often identified, though in adapting it to his style there is, one feels, an implicit understanding and appreciation of her approach to blues. In singing Poor Man's Blues, Ma Rainey and Bessie, in historic interpretations of it, gave depth and sweep to the melodic line, and Brownie keeps it that way, singing to a fine beat, the guitar whanging and whining.

In contrast to Poor Man's Blues, one of the classics of the 12-bar form, Last Mile Blues represents a minstrel style in which a "verse" (1st stanza) sets the scene and blues lines pace the steps to the gallows. Grievin' Hearted Blues -- Ma moaned out these lines before Brownie was born -- is another in the classic mould -- Brownie accents the last line of the second stanza without pause, like the whiplash of a Flamenco!

Brownie's short version of St. James Infirmary (he's in the process of making a more detailed presentation of this sinful saga and there are innumerable stanzas from which to choose) -- is sung with a directness and simplicity that make its relationship to other

folk songs, such as The Streets of Laredo, explicit. Lyrics of both the cowboy song and the untimely demise of the lady friend of a Mississippi gambler relate to English balladry. The guitar supplies ominous chords and a worriedly weaving melody in the treble.

Pallet On The Floor has both a blues flavor and an Anglo-American folk quality. In this moving treatment of a favorite of early jazz bands, Brownie blends verse and chorus in an original and appropriate illustration of the McGhee manner. This is not an off-color blues, despite its lyrics; it is, to be sure, an outspoken one. Deliberately off-color and humorous in intent is Deep Sea Diver. With a delicate guitar for a bawdy blues -- and a humming, wailing, almost wordless refrain -- Brownie gives old and sexy song and gives it the full treatment. He takes some familiar lines and some of his own invention and delivers them with a wallop.

Though blues-based, like Dirty No Gooders, Please Don't Dog Your Woman When You're Wrong is more contemporary in sound and there is more jump in the tempo. The guitar bass is particularly effective. In his singing of it, Brownie departs from strict blues usage, emphasizing key words of the refrain with shifts in tonality, e.g.

Because you ain't doin' nothin'
But drivin' her right to somebody else.

As I have indicated, there is good guitar throughout this set, and fine rapport between voice and guitar. Heavy chords are again employed on Hard Times Blues, the bitter lyrics of which are sung in a restrained and quietly forceful style. Incidentally, the hard-toned guitar on Dirty No Gooders is something to watch out for in Brownie's future work. I was reminded -- I think not without relevance -- of the almost vibrato-less tone Sidney Bechet sometimes used -- usually the intonation of his soprano sax was distinguished with a strong vibrato.

Aside from his many introductions to Folkways albums ("Blues By Brownie McGhee", "Folk Music, U.S.A.", "Big Bill Broonzy: The Country Blues", etc. etc.) Mr. Smith is widely known for his work as co-editor of "Jazzmen," contributor to "The Jazz Makers," and for magazine articles on traditional and contemporary jazz such as his recent background study of Julian "Cannonball" Adderly (in Nugget).

SIDE I, Band 1: LAST MILE BLUES
(Ida Cox-Brownie McGhee)

I wonder why I'm grievin' and feelin' blue;
All I do is moan and cry.
With me you'd be in sympathy if you only knew
And here's the reason why:

Have you heard what that mean old judge done to me?
He told the jury not to let my girl go free. (2)
There I stood, with my head so full of misery (2)
She must die on the gallows, that was the
Court's decree.

I walked the floor, until her trial was through
The Judge he said, "There's nothing that you can do,
The Judge he said, "There's nothing that you can do,
She must die on the gallows) 2
By the neck she gonna be hung)
She must pay with her life
When that death trap is sprung."

(GUITAR)

She refuse, folks, to talk, until it was too late,
She gave her life, to satisfy the state,
We, she refuse, to talk, yes until it was too late,
When they pulled that black cap, well, across my
baby's face (2)
You know I begged the high sheriff, "Please let me
take her place."

Now every day) 2
I seem to see that noose;)
I tried to hide my tears
But, Lord, it wasn't no use.

Thirteen steps
With her lovin' hands by her side
Thirteen long steps
With her long lovin' hands bound to her side --
With a smile on her face -- I hope that's the
way she died.

SIDE I, Band 2: POOR MAN'S BLUES
(Bessie Smith)

Mr. Rich Man, Rich Man,) 2
Open up your heart and mind)
Give a poor man a chance -
Yes, sir, these are hard hard times.

While you're livin' in your mansion,
You don't know what hard times mean,
Poor man's wife's sobbin',
Your wife's livin' like a queen.

Please listen to my pleading
'cause I can't stand hard times so long,
They make an honest man
Do things that he know is wrong.

Poor man fought all the battles,) 2
Poor man will fight today--)
He will do anything you ask him
In the name of the U.S.A.

Now the War is over,) 2
Poor man must live same as you--)
If it wasn't for the poor man,
Mr. Rich Man, what would you do?

SIDE I, Band 3: ST. JAMES INFORMARY BLUES

(Actually, this is an old, traditional blues,
probably related to The Streets of Laredo, Brownie re-
inserts the familiar last stanza.)

Went down to St. James Infirm'ry,
Saw my baby there,
Stretched down on a long wide table,
So cold, so bright, so bare.

Let her go, let her go, God bless her,
Wherever she may be--
She can look this wide world over,
She'll never find a "sweet man" like me.

(GUITAR)

When I die, I want you to dress me in straight laced
shoes,
Box-back coat and a big Stetson hat,
Put a twenty-dollar gold-piece on my watch chain,
So my boys'll know I died standin' pat.

So let her go, let her go, God bless her,
Wherever she may be,
She can search this whole wide world over,
But she'll never find a man like me.

(GUITAR)

SIDE I, Band 4: GRIEVIN' HEARTED BLUES
(Ma Rainey)

You'll know you love me, baby,) 2
Some, some sweet day--)
It is true I love you
But I can't take mistreatment this way.

All I want is my ticket,) 2
Please show me my train)
I'm gonna ride, gonna ride
'Til I can't hear them call my name.

(GUITAR)

I'm gonna start cryin') 2
My love has been refused,)
Gonna keep on cryin'
To lose those grievin' hearted blues.

(GUITAR)

(last 2 lines repeated)

SIDE I, Band 5: PALLET ON THE FLOOR
(Traditional)

Make me down, pallet on your floor,
Make it so your regular man won't know,
If you leave Atlanta, just before you go,
Make me down a pallet on your floor.

Goin' where water taste like wine,
Goin' away, worry you off my mind,
If you leave Atlanta...etc. (refrain)

Goin' where the climate suits my clothes,
Goin' where hope nobody knows,
If you leave Atlanta...etc. (refrain)

Make up down, soft, easy and low,
But if you leave Atlanta...etc. (refrain)

(GUITAR)

SIDE II, Band 1: PLEASE DON'T DOG YOUR WOMAN
(Brownie McGhee)

(REFRAIN):
Please don't dog your woman) 2
When you know you're doin' wrong yourself)
Because you ain't doin' nothin'
But drivin' her right to somebody else.

Don't you know when a woman goes wrong
She don't go wrong by herself?
She gets tired of stayin' at home
While you're out with somebody else.

(REFRAIN)

You never miss your water when you got plenty,
You'll miss it when your well runs dry,
Never miss your woman while she's with you,
You'll miss her when she says good-bye.

(GUITAR)

Well, if I had a million dollars,
Live my life over again,
Spend all my money tryin'
To school my friends, teach 'em to never

(REFRAIN)

(SPOKEN): Talk to me, guitar

(GUITAR)

SIDE II, Band 2: GOOD MORNING BLUES
(TRADITIONAL)

Good morning, Blues, Blues, how do you do-- (2)
"Well, I'm doin' all right, good mornin', how
are you?" (2)

Blues ain't nothin' but a good man feelin' bad, (2)
One of the worst old feelings that a poor man's
ever had.

Sent for you yesterday, here you come today, (2)

Your mouth wide open and don't know what to say.

Woke up this mornin', rollin' from side to side (2)
(Spoken): What's the matter, boy,

Well, I was not sick, I was just dissatisfied.

If the blues was whiskey I'd stay drunk all the
time (2)

Well, the blues is one thing that's always on
my mind.

Got the blues so bad 'til it hurts my feet
to walk (2)

Got the blues so bad 'til it hurts my tongue
to talk. (2)

Good morning, Blues, why do you come so soon? (2)

Well, you used to come at midnight, now you come
at noon.

Blues, Blues, Blues, why don't you leave me
alone? (2)

You keep on hangin' around, you gonna break
up my happy home.

(GUITAR)

SIDE II, Band 3: BROWNIE'S DEEP SEA DIVER
(Trad. McGhee)

I'm a deep sea diver
Got a stroke (and) I can't go wrong,
Dive to the bottom,
My wind holds out so long.

You may take my woman
But you sure can't keep her long--
I got a new way of lovin'
That you, man, just can't catch on.

(Refrain: combines humming, wailing and a few words
thrown in)

Sometimes she wears a hat,
Sometimes she wears a tam--
Great big legs
And a shape just like Georgia ham.

(REFRAIN)

She ain't so good lookin',
Teeth don't shine like pearls,
Don't take good looks
To carry a woman through this world.

(GUITAR)

I don't have to ride on no bus,
Neither take no subway train,
I got so many women,
They gonna buy me an aeroplane.

(REFRAIN)

Well, I love my baby,
Better than I do myself,
Well, if I don't love her,
I don't want nobody else.

(Spoken): Why, boy?

I got my hook in the water,
Yes, my cork's on top,
(Smothers a laugh)
How can I lose, Lord,
With stuff I got.

'Cause I'm a deep sea diver,
Got a stroke and I can't go wrong--
Every time I move
Some poor man loses his home.

SIDE II, Band 4: DIRTY NO GOODERS BLUES
(Bessie Smith - McGhee)

Did you ever fall in love with a woman) 2
Lord, that didn't mean you no good?)
Well, no matter what you did for her,
Seemed like she just didn't understand.

The meanest thing in the world--) 2
(She) Would thrill you through and through)
And there was nothing too dirty
For that woman to do.

She would treat you nice and kind) 2
'Till she win your heart and hand--)
Then she would get so cruel
'Til that woman you just could not stand.

(GUITAR)

Lawd, I really think
No woman's love can last--
They will love you to death
Then treat you like something in the past.

Nineteen women
(Lawd) Living in my neighborhood,
Well, eighteen of them are fools
And the others ain't no good,
Nineteen women
Livin' in my neighborhood,
Well, eighteen of them are fools
And the others ain't no good.

Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawdy,) 2
Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawdy)
Well, that dirty no good woman,
She treats me like a dog.

SIDE II, Band 5: HARD TIME BLUES
(Traditional)

I've never seen) 2
So much real hard times before--)
The wolf keep walkin'
All around my door.

(GUITAR)

They howl all night long) 2
And they moan 'til the break of day--)
They seem to know
My good woman's away.

I can't go outside) 2
To the grocery store--)
I ain't got no money,
And my credit's no good no more.

Won't somebody please) 2
Try to find my good girl for me--)
Tell her I'm broke and hungry,
Lonely as I can be.

(Spoken): Tell 'em how you fell about it!

(Repeats last line)