

Little Brother Montgomery

Blues

Edited and with notes by Rudi Blesh

Folkways Records FG 3527

PHOTO BY DAVID GAHR

M
1630.18
M787
L778
1961

MUSIC LP

FOLKWAYS FG 3527

PLEADING BLUES (vocal with piano)
VICKSBURG 44 (piano solo)
EARLY ONE MORNING (vocal with piano)
NOW ABOUT THAT PRISONER (vocal with piano)
CRESCENT CITY BLUES (piano solo)
PALLET ON THE FLOOR (vocal with piano)
WEST 46th STREET BOOGIE (piano solo)
LOUISIANA RAG (piano solo)
I AIN'T NO BULLDOG (vocal with piano)
MEAN OLD MAMA (vocal with piano)
LONDON SHOUT (piano solo)
STORYVILLE BLUES (vocal with piano)
L & N BOOGIE (piano solo)
IT'S ALL OVER NOW (vocal with piano)

Blues

Little Brother Montgomery

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LITTLE BROTHER MONTGOMERY

and the Blues Heritage

notes by Rudi Blesh

Barrel house music is one of the earliest and richest piano styles developed by the American Negro. It came, more directly than ragtime, from the rich soil of folk life. It seems likely that it was being played -- and sung -- in rudimentary style ever before ragtime, which came in with the turn of the century. Then ragtime itself, comparatively sophisticated music of precise composed form, was adapted by the barrel house pianists to add to their previous repertory of instrumental and vocal blues, and ballads topical of the grim, submerged isolation of the segregated Negro world.

The barrel house, fortunately, has largely disappeared. Yet in its sordid precincts a deeply moving folk music -- a music that often touches nobility -- was born. It is an American heritage, this music of plunging train rhythms, wailing field hollers, and chant of the blues. With barrel house gone, heritage remains.

The barrel house was the last refuge of despair, the resort of the tragically destitute, the blindly rebellious, the abjectly sodden. Cheap, semi-poisonous wines were dispensed in barren rooms swarming with flies. The guzzlers sat on wooden benches drinking from filthy tin cups or pottery mugs that cost a nickel, filled from the barrels along the wall. There was no ceremony in these rough, sullen shops: the customer drank or got out. If he drank himself unconscious he was robbed where he lay in his pool of rank spilled wine or else was 'rolled' in the dark alley then to be stripped of even his tattered clothes by sneak thieves.

Through the foul smoky air loud with the clatter of cups, shrill-edged laughter, rowdy shouting, and drunken snores and weeping, there rang incessantly, day and night, the stark simple blues. This was the haunt of the blues, music of tragedy, dull despair, flaming revolt. Music, incalculably, of hope as well, that -- however forlorn -- was still as persistent as life.

In a dark corner hunched over the battered upright piano, the aged, rosewood 'box,' sat the 'beater,' a lonely figure 'stacking the blues,' tapping his foot, humming in a rough gliding voice the bare and melancholy phrases, the dark words:

Early one morning the blues came falling down
Lord, locked up in jail and prison-bound.

All last night I sat in my cell alone,
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home.

Now you will never see my smiling face again
But mamma always remember that your daddy have been
your friend.



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Sometimes I wonder, honey, why won't you write to
me?
If I been a bad fellow, I did not intend to be.
When they had my trial, baby, you could not be
found
So now it's too late, mistreatin' mama, I'm prison-
bound.

Under the black fingers the yellow keys began to
move: the rolling bass whirled with the roar of the
great drive wheels, the cracked and grieving
treble sounded the 'long and short' of the locomotive's
far-away lonesome whistle. Dying away on
the night air it seemed to sing:

Goin' home, goin' home!
Goin' where the chilly winds don't blow!

Here were the blues, the deepest, richest, most vital stream of all, welling up everywhere from the dark soil.

Eurreal Montgomery, known as 'Little Brother,' is one of the keepers of this heritage of the blues. He was born in 1906 in the small Louisiana town of Kentwood. Kentwood was a rural village when Little Brother was born. It is on the main line of the Illinois Central, from Chicago to New Orleans, and on the Tangipahoa River which empties into Lake Ponchartrain.

Kentwood is only seventy-five miles north of New Orleans and Little Brother is generally spoken of as an Orleanian. But cosmopolitan New Orleans, birthplace of jazz, is not the birthplace of the blues even if Buddy Bolden introduced the blues into jazz. And though the Crescent City heard the stark, lowdown blues chanted on riverfront and levee, they had come down the river from the bottom lands and deep woods. Close as Kentwood is to New Orleans it is only four miles from the Mississippi state line, and Mississippi is at the heart of the area that produced the most poignant, primitive, deeply moving of all country blues.

A span of three quarters of a century bridges the beginnings of those blues to today; a circle perhaps four-hundred miles in diameter encloses the area: Tennessee, southern Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, part of Alabama, southeastern Oklahoma, backwoods Louisiana, and the whole, rolling, scrub-oak area of eastern Texas known as The Thicket. This is the birthplace of country blues and country blues singers. It is the Tennessee of Bessie Smith, Brownie McGhee, and the jug bands and the Arkansas of Charlie Patton and Big Bill Broonzy. It is the Texas that once harbored in its deep recesses the Wild-Goose Nation of escaped slaves, and the later Texas of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blin Willie Johnson, of Hociel Thomas, 'T-Bone' Walker, and Lightning Hopkins. This is The Thicket that encloses prehistoric Caddo Lake whose foot extends to Mooringsport, Louisiana, where Leadbelly was born. And this is the Mississippi from whose relentless, cruel segregation and feudal semi-slavery the darkest and most eloquent of all the blues seem to have come -- particularly around Clarksdale where Muddy Waters, Son House, John Lee Hooker, and the strange, lost, legendary Robert Johnson were born, and where Bessie Smith died.

One of these is Little Brother who first and foremost is a blues artist in this great tradition. Though he has played with jazz bands like that of Lee Collins, the late New Orleans trumpeter, it is as player and singer of archaic blues that Montgomery has always been known. His recordings go back to 1929 and the famous Paramount label that issued the blues of Ma Rainey and Blind Lemon Jefferson. The discography included with these notes lists Little Brother's blues records from 1929 to the present.

The tenacity with which the earliest blues forms have persisted in the rapidly changing American scene of the past four decades is a matter for comment. Despite the persuasive, pervasive invasion of commercial music by way of radio and the jukebox which everywhere has supplanted the old-time blues pianist and jook band, blues artists like John Lee Hooker and Little Brother Montgomery still play and sing the early regional types with an unchanging fidelity and an astonishing freshness as though the music was just being born.

There is a reason for this: once a direct reaction to life as the Negro found it, the blues to some have become a heritage to be preserved pure and unchanged from generation to generation. Brownie McGhee, for example, treasures seventy-year old songs he learned from his father; so did Big Bill Broonzy, who fiercely defended the rightness of the archaic primitive chord progressions against the customary derision of supercilious city-bred and city-trained musicians. So too, Little Brother. "There's a right way to play music," he says, "and there's a wrong way. You can't just play the way you feel...You have to know and study the tradition...The music has to come from within, yes, but you have to play it right."

The folk blues are a unique and precious American heritage unlike any other music anywhere in the world. One of the most remarkable facts of musical history is this short, strophed twelve-bar form of hymn chords that, like a seed that sprouts forever, has lightened the hearts of a burdened people for eighty years at least, and has inspired the great jazz improvisors from Bolden, King Oliver and Satchmo, on to Charlie Parker, and right down to the jazzmen of today. No one will ever know just how many thousands of singers have chanted the blues day and night since the blues began. There is something epic in a music like this that seemingly will never end. This ceaseless play of variations on a stark, simple, fecund set of chords is a long form as impressive, as meaningful, as noble as any symphony. It has the grandeur of the forever unfinished, the ultimate finality of that which can never be finalized, the positive completeness of that which can never be fully stated. It is truly the epic of a people whose just will to freedom cannot be denied forever. This -- past musical considerations -- is the transcendent importance of the blues heritage to all of us, and it is good to know that it still has its devoted keepers, men like Little Brother Montgomery.