

**BARRELHOUSE BUCK: Backcountry Barrelhouse**  
Thomas McFarland ("Barrelhouse Buck") piano and vocals  
Recorded in Alton, Illinois, May 12, 1961 by  
Samuel B. Charters, with the generous assistance of  
Charles O'Brien and Mrs. Ann Charters  
Folkways Records FG 3554



M  
1630.18  
M143  
B27  
1961  
MUSIC LP



SIDE I  
Band 1: LIEUTENANT BLUES  
Band 2: ALTON BLUES  
Band 3: FOUR O'CLOCK BLUES  
Band 4: 20TH STREET BLUES  
Band 5: MERCY BLUES  
Band 6: SO LONG BUCK  
Band 7: I'M GOING TO WRITE YOU A LETTER

SIDE II  
Band 1: MARY, AIN'T I BEEN ONE GOOD MAN TO YOU  
Band 2: REMINISCENCES—BALLING THE JACK AND FIRST RECORDINGS  
Band 3: MAKE ME A SOLDIER OF THE CROSS  
Band 4: NINA BLUES  
Band 5: TAYLOR AVENUE BLUES

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

# BARRELHOUSE BUCK: Backcountry Barrelhouse

FOLKWAYS RECORDS AND SERVICE CORP.  
43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., U.S.A.

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FG 3554

© 1961 Folkways Records and Service Corp., 17 W. 60th Street, NYC USA

**BARRELHOUSE BUCK: Backcountry Barrelhouse**  
**Thomas McFarland ("Barrelhouse Buck") piano and vocals**  
**Recorded in Alton, Illinois, May 12, 1961 by**  
**Samuel B. Charters, with the generous assistance of**  
**Charles O'Brien and Mrs. Ann Charters**  
**Folkways Records FG 3554**



M  
1630.18  
M143  
B27  
1961  
MUSIC LP



BACKCOUNTRY BARRELHOUSE

BARRELHOUSE BUCK

Thomas McFarland ("Barrelhouse Buck"), piano and vocals. Recorded in Alton, Illinois, May 12, 1961, by Samuel B. Charters, with the generous assistance of Charles O'Brien and Mrs. Ann Charters.

SIDE ONE

Band 1. "Lieutenant Blues"	2'40"
Band 2. "Alton Blues"	1'35"
Band 3. "Four O'Clock Blues"	1'55"
Band 4. "20th Street Blues"	2'15"
Band 5. "Mercy Blues"	1'30"
Band 6. "So Long Buck"	2'25"
Band 7. "I'm Going To Write You A Letter"	3'55"

SIDE TWO

Band 1. "Mary, Ain't I Been One Good Man To You"	2'45"
Band 2. Reminiscences - "Balling The Jack" and first recordings.	3'00"
Band 3. "Make Me A Soldier Of The Cross"	3'00"
Band 4. "Nina Blues"	3'50"
Band 5. "Taylor Avenue Blues"	2'35"

BACKCOUNTRY BARRELHOUSE - BARRELHOUSE BUCK

Samuel B. Charters

It has become increasingly evident in recent years that one of the most interesting musical developments within the United States has been that of the music of the American Negro. There has been a continuing interest in the material considered to be a "folk" expression of the Negro, in the spirituals, the work songs, and the ballad songs, but a more broad study of the music has clearly indicated that the entire musical expression of this sub-cultural group has a musical coherence and identity. These newer studies have revealed that areas of Negro musical expression usually regarded as "popular", rather than "folk", such as the recorded blues or gospel song, are entangled to such an extent with the "folk" material that there is a continuing exchange of musical devices and emotional attitudes between the two closely related areas. Earlier collections of Negro music, such as those done in the 1920's by Odum and Johnson, and by Newman White, felt compelled to mention this large body of commercial recordings, and their work includes short discussions of some aspects of this material, but they considered it considerably less important than the material which had been collected in the field. It would not, perhaps, be an exaggeration to say that there is a strong tendency among many of the individuals now working in the field almost to reverse this judgement. The indigenous music of both the rural and urban Negro populations is now so much derived from recordings that we find ourselves turning to the recordings them-

selves, and to the creative performers responsible for the remarkable variety and musicality of these recordings, for the most illuminating insights into the Negro musical expression.

It has been the record collector who has been responsible for much of the knowledge which has now been gathered about this material. The sheer volume of recordings of a popular musical expression like the blues is so large, and the range of performances so wide, that it is only the collector who has been able to give the time necessary to find the patterns of organization within the material. A further complicating factor has been the extreme difficulty of finding examples of many of the recordings. Again, it has been the collector who has had the patience and determination to gather the recordings together. For many of them the music had almost an exotic appeal, and since the earliest period of collecting there has been a strong interest in the performer and his background. In one of the earliest works attempting to gather together the researches of a number of these collectors, the 1936 English work "Rhythm on Record", there is a photograph of one of the most obscure back country instrumental groups, Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers. One of the musicians is incorrectly identified in the list of recordings, and there is some confusion in the listing of the individual selections and their instrumentation, but it still represents a remarkable effort in early blues research. The interest of the collector has been primarily in the musician himself, but simply through their work of finding the musician and gathering together the examples of his work, they have greatly facilitated the work of anyone wishing to study the musical or textual aspects of the material.

It is fortunate that interest in this music developed almost from the earliest appearances of it; especially since it is not a culture which has left behind it considerable written record. A form like the blues seems to be less than sixty years old, the period of extensive recording begins only twenty years later, and almost coincident with the appearance of the first recordings is the appearance of written material concerning the music and performers. It is true that for the earliest years of blues recording, the early '20's, there is not a great deal of contemporary comment, but by the mid-'20's a serious interest had begun to develop. Even more important, from the point of view of the serious student, is the less than thirty-five years which separate him from the early recordings of rural material. A musician who began his recording career as a young man in the late 1920's is now in his late fifties or early sixties. This has meant that, despite the tendency of the chaotic life of the early blues artists to take years off their careers, many of them are still living and performing. Following the suggestion of the early collectors many students are doing increasingly important work with these early performers and their recordings.

It is one of these part-time enthusiasts, working over the last ten or so years, who has helped to develop the picture of the music and musicians in the St. Louis area. He is a member of the St. Louis police force named Charles O'Brien, and he is in many ways typical of the enthusiasts in a number of areas whose work, done almost as a casual hobby, has helped to enlarge, considerably, our knowledge of Negro music. Over the years he had been collecting records, very desultorily, and about the time he joined the police force in 1949 he realized that there had been considerable recording in the St. Louis area. With the encouragement of a young enthusiast named Bob Koester who was at that time still living in St. Louis and active with his Blue Note Record Shop and Delmar Record Company, O'Brien began making inquiries about many of the St. Louis artists. Since that time the musicians and



singers he has located have included Speckled Red, Henry Brown, Edith Johnson, Stump Johnson, Walter Davis, Mary Johnson, and Barrelhouse Buck, among many others, less well known. The most elusive of them was Barrelhouse Buck. He had made a number of recordings for Decca in the 1930's, many of them with other St. Louis musicians like Peetie Wheatstraw; then had dropped out of sight. As it later turned out he and his wife had simply moved to Detroit in 1951 without having a chance to let any of the musicians that Buck had worked with know that they were leaving. His family lived in Alton, Illinois, a smaller town a few miles up the Mississippi from St. Louis; so word never got back to Buck's friends. He and Henry Brown, the fine blues pianist who had recorded in the '20's with Ike Rogers, had been very close over the years, but Buck didn't have Henry's address, and they lost touch with each other. Early in the spring of 1961 O'Brien found it necessary to contact a man named McFarland, who had a small business in Alton. He remembered that Buck's name is Thomas McFarland, and he asked the man that he'd called about the other McFarland. The man laughed and said "You mean my brother." It turned out that O'Brien had not only found Buck's family, but had found Buck himself. Buck's mother was ill, and he had found it necessary to return to Alton to be with her, leaving his wife in Detroit some weeks before.

One of the most interesting aspects of the early Barrelhouse Buck recordings was that fact that they were in many ways atypical. The St. Louis pianists had many similarities in style, and it was often possible to identify an unknown accompanist by his use of the characteristic St. Louis phrase patterns. Buck's playing had a rougher quality to it, almost a more rural quality to it. Although all of them were playing what has been roughly grouped into the category of "barrelhouse" style Buck's playing was a backcountry barrelhouse. There was an insistent quality to his rhythm and a harsh simplicity to his melodic phrases. Because of this quality there was particular interest in Buck and in his musical background. O'Brien spoke to him on the phone that evening, and Buck asked him to call back the next evening at another number, where there was a piano. With one of the neighbors holding the telephone near the piano Buck played a little. When I reached St. Louis a few weeks later and called O'Brien about musicians in the area he immediately suggested that we take recording equipment to Alton and try to get Buck recorded again.

Early the next week three of us, O'Brien, my wife, and myself, drove to Alton. It was a warm spring evening, and the smell from the fields seemed to hang over the small bridge that took us over the Mississippi to Alton. Buck was at a relative's house in a quiet neighborhood at the outskirts of town. Often it is necessary in field recording to use whatever opportunity presents itself to get the recording done; so Buck spent the rest of the evening playing and singing for his friends and neighbors with the recording equipment set up in the room with the piano. He stamped his feet so forcefully while he was playing that it was necessary to put pillows on the floor in front of the piano, but the vibrations still sent ashtrays slipping off the tables and, on two or three numbers, lamps teetering dangerously at a table's edge. By the time he had finished playing everything moveable in the room was sitting on the floor.

Although Buck's playing had a distinctive rural quality, in its directness and intensity, he said that he had been born and raised in the St. Louis area. His mother, who is still living at the age of 102, was raised as a servant in Greenville, Illinois. Buck was born in Alton on September 16,

1903, and the family moved to St. Louis when he was still a boy. He began playing early, and he remembers little rhyme songs like,

"Eighth Street, Eighth Street, all night long,  
Ninth Street, Ninth Street, Sallie Long."

As he relates (Side two, band 2.) he was pressed into service for little house dances when he was still too young to watch the dancing. His mother forgot that it was a new piano, and he could see the people behind him reflected in the mirror-like finish of the wood. He began playing drums when he was a young man, and after working with the fine Charlie Creath band at Jazzland, on Market Street in St. Louis, he toured with the Georgia Smart Set show. From his years as a drummer he may have perhaps kept the insistent rhythm that is a characteristic of his style. He recorded as part of the groups of artists that were assembled by the local talent scouts, Jesse Johnson and Charlie Jordan, at the same time doing quite a bit of playing locally with a group of his own called Buck's Jazz Hounds.

When he'd finished playing he sat back in one of the armchairs in the room, poured himself a drink, and began talking about his music and songs. He is a tall, thin, graying man, almost brooding in his absorption at the piano, and freely talkative away from it. He said that he had consciously developed his style as a backcountry manner of playing. He wanted to have something different from the other pianists in the area; so he had listened to itinerant musicians who had passed through St. Louis's gaudy river neighborhoods, absorbing much of their mood and melodic material. Also from these musicians came much of the harmony that he uses, with its emphasis on chords containing an open fifth or even an open minor seventh. Major harmonies in one hand are set against minor in the other, a progression from tonic seventh to subdominant seventh in the treble is played against an insistent tonic drumming in the bass. Both in the melodic and harmonic structure of his playing Buck represents the effort of the untrained Negro pianist to approximate the non-European scale of much Negro vocal music in the fixed scale of piano keyboard.

Like many of these artists Buck has only a small repertoire of set pieces. Most of the playing is an exposition of related material built around the mood of the moment. The "Four O'Clock Blues" is a set piece played by most of the local pianists, and Roosevelt Sykes has had some success with it through his recordings. Buck remarked that the same piece is known in Detroit as "Dupree Blues", and it seems to be one of the generic pieces which are known to nearly all pianists playing in the style. "Lieutenant Blues" was done as compliment to O'Brien, who, as a city detective, is well known to many of Buck's friends. "I'm Going To Write You A Letter" was meant for his wife, who was still in Detroit. The other vocal blues were more or less remembered from his early recordings; the instrumental numbers were improvisations.

In this music of Barrelhouse Buck can be heard the elements of both "folk" and "popular" styles that have given much of the work of the older recording artists like himself its continuing interest. As these men take the rural, and the unsophisticated urban, material and adapt it for commercial recording, they alter not only the material itself but ultimately, the sources from which they have taken the material, and it is for this, as well as for the musicality of the performance, that their playing and singing becomes of considerable interest in this period of study into the background of their music.