

Recorded in St. Louis in May, 1961, by SAMUEL CHARTERS

VOLUME 2

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3815

# *The Blues in St. Louis* *Henry Brown & Edith Johnson*

Henry Brown, piano / Edith Johnson, vocals

## *Barrelhouse Piano & Classic Blues*



PHOTO BY ANN CHARTERS

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3815

***The Blues in St. Louis***  
***Henry Brown &***  
***Edith Johnson***  
***Barrelhouse Piano & Classic Blues***

**SIDE ONE**

Band 1. Henry Brown Blues	3:25
Band 2. Little Drops of Water	3:06
Band 3. Soothing Syrup Blues	3:39
Band 4. Original Blues	3:25
Band 5. Honeysuckle Rose	1:32

**SIDE TWO**

Band 1. Nickel's Worth of Liver	2:41
Band 2. Deep Brown Blues	4:30
Band 3. Old Time Fast Blues	1:57
Band 4. Changing Blues	3:28
Band 5. Drive My Baby Slow	4:40

Recorded on May 15, 1961 by Samuel Charters and Robert Oswald, with the assistance of Trebor Tichenor, Russ Cassidy, Charles O'Brien, and Ann Charters.

**RETURN TO ARCHIVE**  
CENTER FOR FOLKLORE PROGRAMS  
AND CULTURAL STUDIES  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

© 1961-1984 FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE CORP.  
632 BROADWAY, N.Y.C., 10012 N.Y., U.S.A.

***The Blues in St. Louis***  
***Henry Brown &***  
***Edith Johnson***  
***Barrelhouse Piano & Classic Blues***

Recorded in St. Louis in May, 1961, by SAMUEL CHARTERS  
DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3815

# THE BLUES IN ST. LOUIS

## Volume 2

### HENRY BROWN and EDITH JOHNSON

I still find now that even if I don't bother to read a new book about the blues all the way through - the story, after all, has gotten a little familiar - I still leaf through the pages to the end to look at the pictures. I'm still as curious about what the singers look like as I was in the 1950s, when all we had for a history of the blues were the listings of old records mixed in with the jazz discographies. Who was Mildred Fernandez, I would ask myself when I read that she had made a record of a blues song in 1921, what did she look like? Who was Laughing Charley? What did Snitcher Roberts look like? Now we know so much more about the blues. Mildred Fernandez, it turned out, was a pseudonym for Lillyn Brown, whose picture turned up in Sheldon Harris's massive and invaluable compilation Blues Who's Who. She was very svelte, very beautiful, and she looked fine in a silk top hat. I know what she looks like, even if I have no idea what she sounds like. Often, late at night, I spend an hour with a book like Harris's, just looking at people's faces.

In that summer of 1961 when I was doing my first sessions in St. Louis - I came back the next summer and filmed parts of the documentary "The Blues" there - I kept having the experience of finally seeing someone who had been only a name on a record or in a discography listing. Henry Brown was one of these names, and he turned out to look about the way I expected. He was tall and rumped, his face - like that of many barroom pianists - without much expression, and his shoulders a little

rounded from all the hours he'd spent hunched over a piano. He wasn't doing very well, and his clothes weren't new, but he was keeping himself going with a day job, and there people in the city who knew about his early career. I knew his name from some piano instrumentals and the marvelous pieces he'd done with the eccentric trombonist Ike Rodgers, and somehow he looked like the name on the records.

On the other hand I couldn't in any way relate the Edith Johnson I talked to in her tastefully decorated, sunlit apartment with the girlish voice I'd heard on a record singing "Gimme a nickle's worth of liver, gimmer a dime's worth of stew . . ." to Ike's sauntering trombone accompaniment. Edith, in 1961, was a stylishly dressed, cheerfully competent woman who seemed to know everybody in St. Louis, and for most of her life had been a successful business owner. In that summer I seem to remember she was managing a taxicab company, and before that she had run her own restaurant for many years. When we all gathered in the recording studio that Bob Oswald, a local blues and jazz fan, had set up in his basement it certainly didn't look like a recording session. Edith, in an attractive blouse and skirt, was sitting with Bob Oswald's wife, Vivian, an old friend, and they were gossiping about people in the St. Louis musical world. Henry, in a rumpled shirt, was sitting awkwardly across the room, waiting uncomfortably for the microphones to be set up so we could begin.

When the microphones were ready, however, and Henry went over to the piano, it was clear that this was something they did know about, and I could see in their faces that whatever else was different about their lives their feelings about the blues, for that moment, were the same. Edith had brought three old songs that she'd written during her early recording career, but never had a chance to use, and I wanted to record "Nickle's Worth of Liver" again. She stumbled over some of the verses, and she decided to change the name of the street mentioned in

the song from Lucas Avenue to Leonard Avenue, but once she and Henry had run over it three or four times she found the rhythm again and for the rest of the evening they worked together the way they had all those years before. She was standing behind him as she sang, and Henry was turned away from the keys, listening to the accents and the rhythmic shifts in her singing, emphasizing what she was doing with sudden flurries in the treble or a grumbling insistence in the bass. To give both of them a beat to work against he kicked the side of the loud pedal on the piano.

If Edith Johnson didn't look like someone's idea of a blues singer in 1961, it was probably because her short career in the blues had also been untypical of the rough tent show, down-and-out aura that surrounded women blues singers at that time. She was married to Jessie Johnson, who was the local talent scout for Okeh Records, one of the major blues labels, and she worked behind the counter of their small record shop. She started singing along with the records they were selling, and finally convinced him that she should record herself. She began with a short session in New York early in 1929, and then between September and the end of the same year she recorded four more times and did all of her best known performances. When the record industry collapsed with the beginning of the Depression she gave up singing, and I didn't have the feeling, talking with her thirty years later, that she'd thought much about it since. Perhaps because she hadn't been singing professionally during that time her style was still naively sincere. She was living entirely in 1961's St. Louis, but her singing came out of another, and simpler, time.

Henry was a little older than Edith, and his involvement with music had been on a more professional level. He was born in Troy, Tennessee on July 25, 1906, which made him just about fifty-five when we recorded. His first recordings, like Edith's, had been made in 1929. Brunswick Records had been having considerable success with barrelhouse and boogie

piano styles, and their first release with him was the wonderfully descriptive solo "Stomp 'Em On Down To The Bricks." Then there were the instrumental sessions with Ike Rodgers, and his last solo session had included classic performances like "Deep Morgan Blues" and "Eastern Chimes Blues." The solos he recorded in 1961 had much of the same feeling of the pieces he'd done thirty years earlier. They had the same careless, exuberant flavor of the old barrelhouse blues, and often the propulsive rhythmic force came from a direct, no-nonsense boogie bass. The piece were all improvisations. He would try out a few ideas to see if they would fit together, then he'd nod to Bob Oswald, and he would build the solo around the ideas he'd loosely sketched in his first run-through.

Edith's last blues was "Drive My Baby Slow," and as she sang each of them became more and more involved with the sombre theme of the text. Henry was echoing her last verses with almost dirge-like tolling in the lower keys of the piano. When they'd finished there was a moment of silence; then, to end on a more cheerful note, Henry ran through a sudden stride version of "Honeysuckle Rose." As they laughed together afterwards, finishing a last drink and listening through some of what they'd done it was somehow as though the last thirty years had stood still.

Samuel Charters

LITHO. IN U.S.A.