

SLEEPY JOHN ESTES,  
1929-1940

RBF 8

Edited and with an introduction by  
Samuel Charters



1929-1930  
DIVIN' DUCK BLUES  
THE GIRL I LOVE, SHE GOT LONG CURLY HAIR  
STREET CAR BLUES  
MILK COW BLUES

1930-1940  
JACK AND JILL BLUES  
NEW SOMEDAY BABY  
FLOATING BRIDGE  
BROWNSVILLE BLUES  
NEED MORE BLUES  
JAILHOUSE BLUES  
EVERYBODY OUGHT TO MAKE A CHANGE  
WORKING MAN BLUES

# SLEEPY JOHN ESTES, 1929-1940

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY ANN CHARTERS

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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## SLEEPY JOHN ESTES 1929-1940

Edited, and with an introduction by Samuel Charters.  
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John Estes.)

### Sleepy John Estes

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By SAMUEL CHARTERS

*I was raised in Lawdry County,  
you know I was schooled on  
Winfield Lane.  
I was raised in Lawdry County,  
you know I was schooled on  
Winfield Lane.  
You know what I made of myself,  
it's a cryin' shame.*

Winfield Lane is a rutted, meandering dirt road four or five miles outside of Brownsville, Tennessee. The houses along the road are scattered, some of them deserted. There are fields of cotton, some grazing land for cattle, a few orchard trees; but the rest of the land is overgrown with brush and trees, and the sounds of birds fill the heavy summer air. About a mile and a half from the turnoff into Brownsville there is a sagging red cabin, the bare patch of ground in front of it littered with bits of clothing, dirty dishes, a broken chair. Only a trailing vine that has hung its spreading red flowers over the edge of the rusting corrugated iron of the roof softens the desolation that clings to the rotting boards. The cabin has two rooms; one of them empty except for a few rags that lie in the filth of the floor, the sunlight streaming across them from a gaping split in the boards at one end of the wall. In the other room is a chair, a rusted wood stove, and two dirty, unmade beds. Flies cluster around unwashed dishes left in a bucket on the floor. The cabin is without elec-

tricity or water. In the heat of a summer afternoon it looks like the other empty buildings scattered along Winfield Lane, but in the ruined cabin live an elderly blind Negro, his wife, and their five children. The man is Sleepy John Estes, one of the greatest of the traditional blues singers, whose recordings for Victor and Decca in the 1920s and 1930s are among the most highly sought collector's items, and whose singing has left a deep imprint on the development of the blues.

Since there isn't any electricity in John's cabin, when he wants to use his guitar he has to go across the road and through a field to the cabin of a friend, Philip Meux, a Negro sharecropper who has known him for most of his life. The instrument is old and nearly useless, with a broken comb replacing the bridge at the top of the neck, the wood of the body split, and the frets and fingerboard worn down from years of playing, but it has an amplification attachment, and he can plug it into his old electric amplifier. For dances and entertainments in the surrounding countryside he has to use the electric attachment to get louder than the shouting voices and stamping feet of the dancers. One of his sons, a boy about nine years old, leads him, but it is painful to sit watching as he stumbles along the path, his bent fingers clinging to the neck of his guitar, his steps hesitant and unsure, his clothes hanging ragged and dirty on his gaunt body. He has been blind only a few years, and like many men who become blind late in life he is almost helpless in the darkness that has fallen over the fields and roads that he has known since he was a boy.

IN recent years there has been a growing interest in the blues and in the older blues singers, and more and more of the men who made some of the greatest recordings of the 1920s, the first period of interest in the blues, have been found still living in city slums, or on back streets in Southern country towns. Most of them were young when they recorded, and despite their haphazard life as itinerant blues singers they often still have a remarkable vitality; many of them such as Furry Lewis, Lonnie Johnson, J. D. Short, Henry Townsend, and Pink Anderson, play and sing as well as they did thirty years ago. Older men like these, along with singers who were popular in the Thirties and Forties, like Lightning Hopkins, Big Joe Williams,

Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Muddy Waters, and John Lee Hooker, have become part of an intellectual discovery of the blues that in the last two or three years has reached beyond its intellectual audience to a new and clamorous younger audience. The rediscovery of Sleepy John Estes, one of the greatest of the early singers, is both exciting and dismaying. It is exciting that his voice once more is part of the blues world, and it is dismaying that his life, since his last recordings for Victor in 1940, should have been so difficult for him.

There isn't any county health service to help him with his eyes, but the state of Tennessee sends him a monthly check for himself and the children that could keep them very adequately. Philip Meux, who has for many years tried to help John, says that part of his trouble is his blindness. "People cheats him, you know, when he goes and buys things. If he gets some butter they makes him pay four times what it says on the counter; then they don't give him his right change." But John is too proud to let anyone help him, and he stumbles through the Brownsville streets with his son, trying to live as he did before he lost his sight. Bob Koester, a young blues enthusiast from Chicago who owns the Delmar Record Company, went down to Brownsville in May to get John for a series of concerts and a recording session in the Chicago area. Phil Meux remembers that Koester took John into a clothing store and outfitted him, even getting him some "slack britches," but in his ruined cabin John still wears his ragged farm clothes. As Meux stood beside John's cabin he kept shaking his head. "If any more money comes to John for his singing I'm going to try to help him do something about his house."

A rooster crows, sparrows chirp from the weeds beside the house, a bee drones about a drooping hollyhock near the worn steps. His children sit watching him, their faces expressionless, Phil Meux fans himself with a folded newspaper. John's voice cries out in the shadows of the porch, his face turned toward the sunlight as he sings:

Now my mother and my father  
both dead and gone.  
Now my mother and my father  
both dead and gone.  
My mother and my father, they  
both dead and gone.  
They left me 'round here, still  
stumbling along.

SIDE I

1929-1930

- Band 1. Divin' Duck Blues  
Band 2. The Girl I Love, She Got Long Curly Hair

Band 3. Street Car Blues

Band 4. Milk Cow Blues

1930-1940

- Band 5. Jack and Jill Blues  
Band 6. New Someday Baby

SIDE II

1930-1940

- Band 1. Floating Bridge  
Band 2. Brownsville Blues  
Band 3. Need More Blues  
Band 4. Jailhouse Blues  
Band 5. Everybody Ought To Make A Change  
Band 6. Working Man Blues

SIDE ONE

Band 1. DIVIN' DUCK BLUES

Now, if the river was whiskey, and I was a diving duck,  
Now, if the river was whiskey, I was a diving duck,  
I would dive on the bottom, never would come up.

Don't never take a married woman to be your friend.  
Don't never take a married woman to be your friend.  
She will get all your money, give it to her other man.

Now a married woman, always been my crave.  
Now a married woman, always been my crave.  
Now a married woman, gonna carry me to my grave.

Now ain't it hard to love someone that's (dead?)  
Now ain't it hard to love someone that's (dead?)  
You can't get her when you want her, have to use her when you can.

Now the sun's gonna shine in my back door some day.  
Now the sun's gonna shine in my back door some day.  
Now the wind's gonna rise, gonna blow my blues away.

Now, went to the railroad and looked up at the sun.  
Now, went to the railroad, looked up at the sun.  
If the train don't hurry, gonna be some walkin' done.

Band 2. THE GIRL I LOVE, SHE GOT LONG CURLY HAIR

Now, I'm going to Brownsville, take that right hand road.  
Now I'm going to Brownsville, take that right hand road.  
Lord, I ain't gonna stop walkin' 'til I get in sweet mama's door.

Now the girl I'm loving she got great long curly hair.  
Now the girl I'm loving she got great long curly hair.  
And her momma and her poppa, they sure don't 'low me there.

If you catch my jumper hanging outside your wall,  
If you catch my jumper hanging outside your wall.  
Now you know by that, babe, I need my ashes hauled.

Now what you gonna do, babe, your dough roller gone?  
What you gonna do, babe, your dough roller gone?  
(Go into your kitchen, cook until she come.)?

Many of the singers who recorded the early blues were unconcerned with enunciation and it is difficult to make out a line or a phrase, sometimes even an entire verse. John is even more difficult to understand than many of the others; since he sings with his mouth tightly constricted. This blues is still widely sung in Memphis, usually with the first two verses kept together, but other verses added to fill it out. Both Furry Lewis and Memphis Willie B. have recorded it within the last two years. The "right hand road" is a road at the edge of Brownsville where John turned to go into town, but to the Memphis singers it is Summer Street, the road that leads out of Memphis toward Brownsville. These instrumental performances with Estes, Jab Jones on piano, and Yank Rachel on mandolin, are remarkable for their musical complexity and originality. There is nothing else in the blues that resembles the use of the doubled rhythm on the guitar and the piano and the free legato line of the mandolin. Yank and John came into Memphis and got Jab from the Memphis Jug Band, which was using him to play jug and sing. He did some occasional recordings on piano, especially some accompaniments for solo recordings by the leader of the jug band, Will Shade, but he doesn't seem to have had a chance to record outside of the groups, despite the inventiveness and rhythmic interest in his playing. John had been doing some work as a track caller, and although he was a remarkably sensitive and gifted singer his guitar playing was, and still is, fairly rudimentary. He accompanied himself with an unvarying rhythm that was twice as fast as the usual blues rhythm, probably to compensate for his lack of dexterity. Jab was able to develop this rhythmic style on the piano, and the ensemble sound is at first almost bewildering. The voice and the mandolin are carrying the melody in one rhythm, while the guitar and piano are accompanying it in another, with both the piano and the mandolin playing in very loosely constructed phrase patterns. For moments it seems that the music will falter and come apart, but both Rachel and Jab were very skilled musicians, and their style had a well developed logic of its own, despite its seeming awkwardness. It is one of the memorable sounds of the early blues. Jab has died, but Rachel has been found living in Indianapolis and is playing with John again.

Band 3. STREET CAR BLUES

Now, I know the people is on a wander everywhere,  
I say I know the people is on a wander everywhere,  
Because they heard of poor John (started 'round  
the?) 'lectric car.

Now catch it (Smith?) street car park, ride it  
down to Summer Street,  
I say I catch it (Smith?) street car park, ride  
it down to Summer Street.  
Lord, I'm going to ease it down in Roebust, catch  
my baby out on a midnight creep.

Lord, the reason why, baby, I been so long writing  
to you.  
I say the reason why, baby, I been so long writing  
to you.  
Because I been studying so hard, Lord, how to sing  
these blues.

Lord, I lost my papa and my dear mama too.  
I say I lost my papa and my dear mama too.  
Lord I'm gonna quit my bad way of living and visit  
the Sunday school.

This blues refers to the new street car system  
in Memphis, the "electric cars" that went from  
the south end of town to Summer Street, the  
"right hand road" for someone going from Memphis  
to Brownsville. The line "I'm going to ease it  
down in Roebust, catch my baby out on a midnight  
creep," refers to a small town outside of Memphis.  
If he gets there without anyone seeing him he'll  
probably find his woman out with someone else.

Band 4. MILK COW BLUES

Now asked sweet mama, let me be her kid.  
She said, "I might, but I like to keep it hid."  
Well, she looked at me, she begin to smile,  
Says, "I thought I would use you for my man awhile.  
Just don't let my husband catch you there,  
Just don't let my husband  
Catch you there."

Now, went upstairs to pack my leaving trunk;  
I never saw no whiskey, the blues done made me  
sloppy drunk.  
Say I never saw no whiskey;  
Blues done made me sloppy drunk.  
Now I never saw no whiskey,  
but the Blues done made me sloppy drunk.

Now some say they (dream?), some say they was (?),  
But it's a slow consumption killing you by degrees.  
Lord, it's a slow consumption  
Killing you by degrees.  
And it's a slow consumption,  
And it's killing you by degrees.

This blues, with its repetition of the second line,  
is an interesting variation on the standard blues  
verse pattern. It was incorrectly titled "Sloppy  
Drunk Blues" on the RBF set, The Rural Blues.

Band 5. JACK AND JILL BLUES

Now the sun gonna shine in my back door some day.  
Now the sun gonna shine, my back door some day.  
Now the wind gonna rise, blow my blues away.

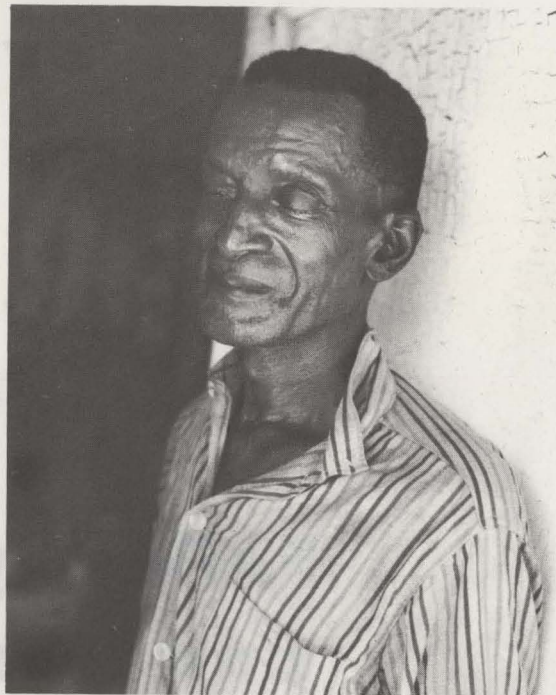
Now sure as the stars shine in the world above.  
Now sure as the stars shine in the world above.  
You know life is too short to worry 'bout the  
one you love.

Now I ain't got no woman, ain't got no child  
in school.  
Now I ain't got no woman, got no child in  
school.  
Reason I'm gangin' 'round here, (stickin' here  
dry long so?)

Now you never have told me you want your rolling  
done.  
Now you never have told me you want your rolling  
done.  
I believe you must want me to roll from sun to  
sun.

Now it was late last night, when everything was  
still.  
Now it was late last night, when everything was  
still.  
Now me and my baby was playing old Jack and Jill.

In these later recordings the instrumental sound  
is more conventional than on John's recordings of  
the late '20's. His own guitar playing is un-  
changed, but the men working with him are closer  
to the popular blues style. Charlie Pickett was  
a younger guitar player from Brownsville who did  
the brilliant "Down The Highway" reissued on RBF  
202, "The Rural Blues". John thinks he is still  
living in St. Louis, although he had given up  
the blues and has become a preacher. The har-  
monica player on pieces "Jack and Jill Blues is  
John's cousin, Hammie Nixon, or Nix, as he called  
himself for recordings in the 1930's. Hammie is  
now touring with John again, and still lives in  
Brownsville.



SLEEPY JOHN ESTES - 1962

Photo By Ann Charters

Band 6. NEW SOMEDAY BABY

When trouble first started,  
Down in my front door,  
Seems like I never had no trouble  
In my life before.  
Someday, baby, you ain't gonna trouble my mind  
any more.

Now trouble in the mornin',  
Trouble late at night,  
Seems like I'm treated  
Every way but right.  
Someday, baby, you ain't gonna trouble my mind  
any more.

Now you got a little woman,  
She won't treat you right.  
Feed you in the day,  
Whip a storm at night.  
Someday, baby, you ain't gonna trouble my mind  
any more.

I wonder what's the matter,  
Can't get no mail.  
Had a dream last night  
Black cat crossed my trail.  
Someday, baby, you ain't gonna trouble my mind  
any more.

I know my baby,  
Tell you how I know.  
By the (dress?) on her hair,  
Same little dress she wore.  
Someday, baby, you ain't gonna trouble my mind  
any more.

Now looky here, baby,  
See what you done done.  
You done made me love you,  
Now your man done come.  
Someday, baby, you ain't gonna trouble my mind  
any more.

SIDE TWO

Band 1. FLOATING BRIDGE

Now I never will forget that floating bridge.  
Now I never will forget that floating bridge.  
Now I never will forget that floating bridge.  
Tell me five minutes time in the water I was hid.

When I was going down I throwed up my hands.  
When I was going down I throwed up my hands.  
When I was going down I throwed up my hands.  
Please take me on dry land.

Now they carried me in the house and they laid  
me 'cross the bank.  
Now they carried me in the house and they laid  
me 'cross the bank.  
Now they carried me in the house and they laid  
me 'cross the bank.  
'Bout a gallon and a half of muddy water I  
had drank.

They dried me off and they laid me in the bed.  
Now they dried me off and they laid me in the  
bed.  
Now they dried me off and they laid me in the  
bed.  
Couldn't hear nothing but muddy water running  
through my head.

Now my mother often taught me, quit playing a bum.  
Now my mother often taught me, quit playing a bum.  
Now my mother often taught me, quit playing a bum.  
Go somewhere, settle down and make a crop.

Now the people standing on the bridge was screaming  
and crying.  
Now the people on the bridge was screaming and  
crying.  
Now the people on the bridge standing screaming and  
crying.  
Lord have mercy while we gwine.

Few singers have used the narrative blues form  
with the success that John has had with it. He  
is interested in the ordinary details of anything  
that happens to him, and he often includes these  
details in his songs. "Floating Bridge" is the  
story of an accident he had outside of Hickman,  
Kentucky in the 1937 floods. He was driving with  
some other men and the car went onto a temporary  
bridge - a floating bridge held to the bank with  
cables - and skidded out of control. John was  
bent over putting a lace in his shoe and he didn't  
see what was happening until it was too late. He  
was trapped in the car and it was only the sudden  
realisation by his cousin, Hammie Nix, that John  
was still under water that saved him. Hammie  
went back into the river, despite a bad cut on  
his head, and pulled John to the bridge where they  
were able to revive him. His blues vividly catches  
his emotions at his near drowning.

Band 2. BROWNSVILLE BLUES

Now I can straighten your wires, you know poor  
Vasser can grind your valves.  
Now I can straighten your wires, you know poor  
Vasser can grind your valves.  
Man, when I turn your motor loose and it sure  
will split the air.

Now Vasser can line your wheels, you know poor  
Vasser can tune your horn.  
Now he can line your wheels, you know poor Vasser  
can tune your horn.  
Then when he set it out on the highway you can  
hear your motor hum.

Now my generator is bad, and you know my lights  
done stopped.  
Now my generator is bad, and you know my lights  
done stopped.  
And I reckon I'd better take it over to Durhamville  
and I'm going to stop at Vasser Williams'  
shop.

Now I were raised in Lauderdale County, you know  
I was schooled on Winfield Lane.  
Now I were raised in Winfield County, and I was  
schooled in Winfield Lane.  
Then what I made of myself, I declare it was a  
crying shame.

Now Brownsville is my home, and you know I ain't  
going to throwed her down.  
Now Brownsville is my home, and you know I ain't  
going to throwed her down.  
Because I'm 'quainted with John Law, and they  
won't let me down.

Although there are many blues which use the  
automobile as the basis for an involved sexual  
symbolism John has said that this blues is meant  
to be taken literally, and that he is referring

to a friend who had a repair shop in the small town of Durhamville, between Brownsville and Ripley.

Band 3. NEED MORE BLUES

Need more (? hungry man am I?)  
Need more (?)  
And that's the reason I believe I'll make a change.

Now, something to tell you.  
Keep it to yourself.  
Don't tell your sisters,  
Don't tell nobody else.  
'Cause need more (?)  
And that's the reason I believe I'll make a change.

Now, bought some gloves,  
Bought you some socks,  
I believe poor John,  
He needs a box,  
'Cause need more (?)  
And that's the reason I believe I'll make a change.

Now looky here baby,  
See what you done done.  
Done made me love you  
Now your man done come,  
'Cause need more (?)  
And that's the reason I believe I'll make a change.

Now take me back,  
Won't do no more.  
Get all my loving,  
You let Mr. So and So go,  
'Cause need more (?)  
And that's the reason I believe I'll make a change.

This is one of John's most difficult blues to understand; since his enunciation is even less clear than usual. Most of the verses, however, are conventional with him and there is difficulty only in the refrain.

Band 4. JAILHOUSE BLUES

Now I was sitting in jail with my eyes all full of tears.  
Now I was sitting in jail with my eyes all full of tears.  
You know I'm glad I didn't get lifetime, boys, that I 'scaped the electric chair.

Now I consulted lawyers, and I know dern well I was wrong.  
Now I consulted lawyers and I know dern well I was wrong.  
You know I couldn't get a white man in Brownsville, yes, to even say they would go my bond.

Now the sheriff he 'rest me and he march me around from the circuit court.  
Now the sheriff he 'rest me and he march me around from the circuit court.  
You know I knowed the thing was getting kind of cross, I heard the judge when he set up his court.

(Now I know?)

(Verse unintelligible.)



JOHN ESTES' WIFE

Photo by Ann Charters

Band 5. EVERYBODY OUGHT TO MAKE A CHANGE

Now, change in the ocean,  
Change in the deep blue sea,  
Take me back, baby,  
You'll find some change in me.  
Everybody, they ought to change some time.  
Because it's soon or late we have to go down in that old lonesome ground.

Now change my money,  
Change my honey,  
I change babies  
Just to keep from being funny.  
Everybody, they ought to change some time.  
Because it's soon or late, we have to go down in that old lonesome ground.

Now change my pants,  
Change my shirt,  
I change, baby,  
To get shed of the dirt.  
Everybody, they ought to change some time.  
Because it's soon or late, we have to go down in that old lonesome ground.

Now, change home,  
I change town.  
I change babies,  
All the way 'round.  
Everybody, they ought to make a change.  
Because it's soon or late, we have to go down in that old lonesome ground.

Now change walk,  
I change talk.  
I change babies  
Just to keep from being balked.  
Everybody, they ought to make a change.  
Because it's soon or late, we have to go down in the old lonesome ground.

Band 6. WORKING MAN BLUES

Now you done spent all my 1940 rent, woman, you  
done worked on my substitute.  
Now you done spent all my 1940 rent, woman, you  
done worked on my substitute.  
Then if you don't reach that 1941, ooh babe,  
what in the world you gonna do.

Now you ought to cut off so many trucks and  
tractors, white folks, you ought  
to work more mules and men.  
Now you ought to cut off so many trucks and  
tractors, white folks, you ought  
to work more mules and men.  
Then you know that would make, ooh babe, money  
get thick again.

Now when a man gets together, you know he's turning  
his stocks into feed.  
Now when a man gets together you all know he's  
turning his stocks into feed.  
He say he gonna sell all his corn and buy gas, ooh,  
babe, pour it in the automobile.

Now I been studyin' I been wonderin', what makes a  
man turn the ground over in the wintertime.  
Now I been studyin' I been wonderin', what makes  
a man turn the ground in the wintertime.  
You know let rain and snow rot the grass, ooh babe,  
that make fertilizer for the ground.

Now the government given us a school in Brownsville,  
boy, you know I think that's very nice.  
Now the government given us a school in Brownsville,  
boy, you know I think that's very nice.  
You know the children can go in the daytime, ooh  
babe, and the old folks have it at night.

This was John's last commercial recording, and it  
is interesting to see that it is his general  
commentary on the economic situation. The second  
verse is even a naive suggestion that returning to  
old fashioned methods of agriculture would end the  
depression. The second guitar player is a young  
Brownsville musician named Son Bonds.

A NOTE

I would like to thank Pete Whalen and Ben Kaplan  
for making available to me rare originals which  
were in their collections. John Estes is now an  
exclusive recording artist for Delmar Records in  
Chicago, and his first release is already available.  
With him are Hammie Nix and, on some selections, the  
pianist Knocky Parker. Bob Koester, head of Delmar  
Records, has begun an extensive recording program  
with John and plans to record his entire repertoire  
for future release.

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