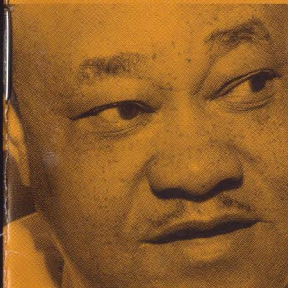




Smithsonian
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Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings
Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies
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SMITHSONIAN/FOLKWAYS 

BLUES BY
ROOSEVELT
"THE HONEYDRIPPER"
SYKES

BLUES BY ROOSEVELT "THE HONEY-DRIPPER" SYKES

Originally issued in 1961 as Folkways 3827.

Original sessions produced by Memphis Slim.

Reissue produced by Matt Walters.

Annotated by Val Wilmer and Matt Walters.

1. Sweet Old Chicago (2:55)
2. Don't Care Blues (2:04)
3. 47th Street Jive (2:39)
4. Memphis Slim Rock (3:05)
5. 44 Blues (2:40)
6. Security Blues (2:37)
7. R.S. Stomp (2:28)
8. Ran the Blues Out of My Window (2:54)
9. All My Money's Gone (3:02)
10. Woman in Elaine, Arkansas (2:22)
11. The Mistaken Life (2:40)
12. The Sweet Root Man (2:32)
13. The Thing (3:42)
14. Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone (2:28)

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

This Smithsonian/Folkways reissue of *Blues by Roosevelt (The Honeydrinker)* Sykes honors one of the blues' consummate artists. Born January 31, 1906 in Helena, Arkansas, Sykes had already established himself as a formidable pianist in and around Helena when he made his first recordings in New York in 1929 at the age of 23. By then, West Helena pianists Leothus 'Pork Chop' Green and Jesse Bell had left their mark on Sykes, and he was to enjoy a remarkable 50-year recording career. After retiring to Gulfport, Mississippi with his family, Roosevelt Sykes passed away in New Orleans on July 11, 1983.

I still recall vividly seeing Sykes perform in a workshop and concert setting at the 1971 University of Pittsburgh Blues Festival. Surrounded by contemporaries such as Mance Lipscomb, Rev. Gary Davis, Mississippi Fred McDowell and legions of young admirers, Sykes struck me as a robust and easy-going professional in his element. His performances that weekend left everyone in awe.

It is no wonder that Sykes was virtually

unmatched in sustaining a career. From his first recordings, Sykes demonstrated that he was an accompanist of the highest order. As Paul Oliver noted in *Blues off the Record*, Sykes contributed thoughtful support to many hundreds of other singer's recordings. The solo and small group sessions he led over the decades were consistently brilliant, and few blues artists could match his powerful, original and riveting piano style, and songwriting abilities.

Unfortunately, little is known about the studio date which yielded this rare 1961 Folkways LP. We assume it stems from Folkways founder Moses Asch's relationship with Memphis Slim, for Slim made several fine records for Asch in the early sixties, supervised this session, cut in Chicago in 1961, and even appears on *Memphis Slim Rock*, sharing the keyboard with Sykes. No other post-war session captures Sykes in finer form, his rigorous, good-natured persona, and his casual, yet powerful singing and playing are fully abundant.

Included here are the original notes by Val Wilmer, complete song lyrics, and artist discography. We also have the good fortune of being able to master the CD directly from

the original analog session tapes utilizing Pacific Microsonics' new HDCD mastering process. The tapes had been well preserved first by Moses Asch, and later by the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife Programs Archive under the care of Archivist Jeff Place. The Honeydripper has never sounded better.

Matt Walters, August 1995

ROOSEVELT SYKES

by Valerie Wilmer

If the blues is the music that tells of life and living, Roosevelt Sykes is the blues, for few men are endowed with greater perception of life than he. The ability to communicate all he has learned from day to day existence comes naturally to Roosevelt, whether he is chatting in a bar-room or sitting at the piano in an after-hours blues joint.

Pseudo-sincerity is easy to communicate when performing in such an emotional idiom as the blues but the candor that comes from actual experience is by far the most rewarding. For proof of this, listen to an imitation and then follow it up with a 'Sykes' special', and 'The Honeydripper' has it every time.

Roosevelt 'The Honeydripper' Sykes, (Moslem name Roosevelt Sykes Bey). first saw the light of day in Helena, Arkansas on January 31st, 1906. At the age of three he moved with his parents to St. Louis but still continued to visit his hometown.

"Every Summer I would go down to

Helena to visit my grandfather on his farm," Roosevelt recalled. "He was a preacher and he had an organ which I used to practice on, trying to learn how to play. I always liked the sound of the blues, you know, liked to hear people singing, and since I was singing first, I was trying to play like I sang."

At school Roosevelt was a great favourite with the girls, who would gather round him at the school organ and listen to the blues come rolling out. It was in this way that he earned his soubriquet of 'The Honeydripper.' As he says: "The boys said the girls was buzzing round me like bees or something, and so I must be dripping honey!" The nickname stuck and later became the title of his famous tune, written in 1931 and recorded by Edith Johnson. And in 1945 it was Joe Liggins who made an all-time big hit with it; deservedly so, says the composer, for "I reckon he made a better job of it than I did!"

It seems the genial warm-hearted blues man was quite a one for nick-names, for he picked up 'Dobby' in St. Louis, later adding it to his mother's maiden-name for the recording pseudonym of 'Dobby Bragg,' a combination which puzzled blues collectors for years.

Before Roosevelt was considering a professional career in music, most of his time was spent leading the life of a country boy; hunting, fishing and picking cotton. "My grandfather had a cotton farm, but there was very little cotton to pick. I did pick some, but you know, there was nothing happening in Helena except for raising cotton and corn."

When he was around fourteen, he started playing the blues in a place called 'The Jazzland' at 2216 Market Street in St. Louis. "That was one of the leading night-clubs for dancers and youngsters at that time," he recalled, "Floyd Campbell played drums there, and Charlie Creath blew the trumpet."

"We'll jump way back for a minute," Roosevelt said when we were chatting one day. "There was a guy in Arkansas, name of Jesse Bell, who I thought was the best blues singer I ever heard, (which I still think to this day). That's the fellow who really inspired me to love the blues, and eventually I intend to record one, 'In The Honour Of Jesse Bell'."

While Roosevelt was playing nights at the Jazzland, he was working as a dish-

washer, and later as a waiter, filling in with the odd gig here and there, till he found, as have so many others, that the blues and jazz had taken a hold on him. "Music is all soul. You can't get it, you can't buy it—that's all it is. And if you can't get it, then you've missed the whole boat," he once said, and it was this impetus that sent him wandering into Jesse Johnson's De Luxe Music Shop one day in 1929.

"I told him I had some songs that I wanted to record and his remarks were: 'You mean you got some words!' I remember that quite well," Roosevelt laughed, "Yes, that's what you could call it," I replied, and so I auditioned for him. He liked what I was doing and thought it was O.K. for recording."

And so began the start of a recording career that is still going strong. The first tunes Roosevelt made were 'Boot That Thing' and '44 Blues.' Of the latter, which tells of carrying a gun, Roosevelt said, "Somebody came up to me and asked what did I ever do with that pistol and was my shoulder still sore from carrying it? So I had to explain it was just a song. Some people will believe anything!"

This first record was a hit, and over the years Roosevelt has followed it up with a couple of hundred further sides, nearly all originals, and several others have become hits. "Oh my!" he exclaimed in reply to a request for the number of songs he had written. "That's hard to tell. I had a contract at one time to write twenty four numbers a year and that went on for maybe ten years. I guess it's close to about five or six hundred or so."

All though the thirties Roosevelt worked consistently, and later, though times were lean for several other talented blues-men, he always managed to obtain employment in music. This was doubtless because of his consistency, both on the artistic and entertaining levels, his good humour, and his musical adaptability. In view of his predilection for nick-names, one given to a much lesser rock 'n' roller of today would be extremely apt: "Mr. Versatility" suits Roosevelt Sykes better than Lloyd Price! I certainly can't think of any other blues singer who could really earn that pseudonym.

Roosevelt has at one time or another worked with nearly all the famous blues

singers, people like Walter Davis, St. Louis Jimmy, Edith Johnson, Peetie Wheatstraw, Kokomo Arnold, Washboard Sam and so on. In the late 30's he started touring, doing one-nighters with his own group. "This was a very versatile band. We did blues, rock 'n' roll, and jazz. I had Little Sax Crowder on tenor who was formerly with Earl Hines and wrote Billy Eckstine's 'Stormy Monday Blues.'

"I found that I loved the band, but it's a little difficult at times, keeping the men straight, you know. I imagine it's worth it in the long run, but I find that I'd rather be the featured attraction nowadays than a bandleader. We went all over the States: North, South, East, West, everywhere, and I had a wonderful booking agent who kept me working every night."

Roosevelt has always been willing to impart knowledge, either teaching the blues or just giving advice to the needy. One of his most famous pupils was Memphis Slim whom he met in Memphis. "Then he was known as Peter Chatman, and he could play very little. He was just beginning, and he told me he liked my style and he was one of my fans. And I

took a liking to him because he liked my songs and my style of playing, and we've been friends ever since.

"Slim came up to Chicago about 1940, when I was living there, and that's when he started recording. I had introduced him to several record companies, and Slim was a success and been going well ever since."

Around this time Roosevelt had his own T.V. show in Mobile, 'The Toast Of The Coast,' playing fifteen minutes every day. He was about the only blues singer to do this, and knowing him, probably made a good job of it, for the amiable blues-man is a joy to watch as well as to listen to.

Though Roosevelt sings the sad blues as much as the glad ones, his blues rarely sound sad, they are only tinged with that irony which has made the blues the greatest-ever form of sardonic humour. Complete musical individuality is his, too, for his performance is an extension of the personality of the man himself. Even his physical characteristics seem to be interpreted in the extrovert robustness of his pianistics.

Listen to 'The Honeydrinker' and you'll find the slightly ineffective name a veritable antithesis. It is hardly honey that Roo-

sevelt drips from the ivories, it is more of a potent liquor which goes straight to your head with the laying down of the insistent, driving beat. Perhaps his voice, powerful in emotion if not in timbre, provides a sweeter, richer contrast, but 'honey' is much too 'syrupy' a term for this titan of the blues!

"All I've done, all my life, is picking a little cotton and picking a little piano," said Roosevelt Sykes, and if he carries on in that way, it's a certainty that there is endless joy to come for hundreds who have yet to hear this magnificent man. Let's finish this piece on a welcome note from a man who *knows*:

Roosevelt said: "I believe the blues are always in demand. They always will be because it's mostly 'soul.' Blues is a thing that people that can't explain themselves and know what they want to say, but can bring out in a song, and it's for real.

"Blues is a true confession thing, and people always did like the truth. It always has been and it always will be—That's my belief about it."

©Valerie Wilmer, June 1961.

SONG TEXTS

1. Sweet Old Chicago

Oh baby don't you wanna go?/ Oh baby don't you wanna go?/ To the bright light city—sweet old Chicago.

Well you love me in the mornin' and love me late at night/ Well I got so I cain't hardly bare you out of my sight.

Oh baby don't you wanna go?/ Oh baby don't you wanna go?/ To that bright light city—sweet old Chicago. Well, all right now.

Oh baby don't you wanna go?/ Oh tell me don't you wanna go?/ To that bright light city—sweet old Chicago.

2. Don't Care Blues

Woke up this mornin' with the don't care blues/ Woke up this morning' with the don't care blues/ Feel like I wanna gamble, don't care if I lose.

Feel like jumpin' treetop to the ground/ Yeah I feel like jumpin' from a tall pine to the ground/ All the gals I love, they wanna throw me down.

Oh yes, I got two in Birmingham/ I got one gal in Memphis, two in Birmingham/ If they all throw me down, I wouldn't give a snap!

3. 47th Street Jive

(spoken)
Whadya know man? Here in Los Ang/
Looka that, hello Morning Glory what's your story?/ Charlie Chan I ain't got no plan/ Don't tell me no tale, nightengale.

(sung)
Don't tell me to dance cuz I ain't ready to die/ Don't tell me to dance cuz I ain't ready to die/ Talk too much I know you bound to lie, well all right!

You wanna meet you hep-cats and you fly and shake/ You wanna meet you hep-cats and you fly and shake/ Go to 47nd Street and get your solid kicks,/ (spoken: Go to 47nd Street and Northern Parkway—in the windy—Chicago)

Had a chick one day, she had to have a new dress, Oh I see/ Had a chick one day, she say "I gotta have me a new dress."/ When I look into her eyes I saw she would

like the rest, (spoken: Well all right, I'm for what she could get.)

Oh yeah (carpet-dressers,) they ride around in a taxi cab/ Them chicks is (carpet-dressers,) they ride around in a taxi cab/ You can tell when they jivin' they got too much gift a gab. (spoken: They talk too much, well all right.)

4. Memphis Slim Rock

(spoken)
Call this the Memphis Slim run (said during piano solo). Ya know why we call him Memphis Slim? Cuz he's from Memphis, Ha-ha - Well all right! Memphis Slim Rock! Let it roll!

5. 44 Blues

Lord I walked all night long with my 44 in my hand/ Lord I walked all night long with my 44 in my hand/ I was lookin' for my woman and I found her with another man.

I wore my 44 so low, Lord it made my shoulder sore/ I wore my 44 so low until it made my shoulder sore/ After I do what I want to do I ain't gonna wear my 44 no more.

Well I got a little cabin and my cabin is #44/ Yes I got a little cabin and my cabin is #44/ When I wake up every mornin' I can hear the wolves scratchin' on my door.

6. Security Blues

Darlin' cain't ya see, I'm tryin' ta putcha wise/ I love ya so much I know you'd be surprised/ Oh, you can't run around all the time./ Don't you know a little security means a peace of mind.

One thing darlin' I want you to understand/ Ya better make hay while you're in demand/ Because, Oh you can't be lucky all the time, that's for sure/ Don't you know a little security means a peace of mind.

Gonna tell ya darlin', just like a friend/ To start ya little binge you need some money comin' in cuz/ Oh you ain't gonna be lucky all the time/ Don't you know a little security means a peace of mind.

Baby I know ya fine and ya got just what it take/ But when old age creep up on ya, ya gonna begin to break/ So oh, you ain't gonna be young and beautiful all the time/

Don't you know a little security means a peace of mind.

Gonna tell ya darlin' just like it is/ When ya strike hard luck your eyes gonna fill with tears/ Oh, you just cain't be lucky all the time/ Don't you know a little security means a peace of mind.

7. R.S. Stomp (Instrumental)

8. Ran the Blues Out of My Window

Well, one Monday mornin' about half past four/ I run blues out of my window and trouble out my back door/ Ya gotta iron my chopper, rub out you...Oh Lord/ I'm gonna ride that train they call the Cannonball.

First stop it make it stoppin' in sweet Bowlin' Green/ Next time ya blow it, blow it for... New Orleans/ Ya gotta iron ma chopper, it's rough drivin' oh Lord/ I'm gonna ride that train they call the Cannonball.

Now Mary had a little baby, she called him Jim, Jim, Jim/ put him in a spittoon and told him to swim, swim, swim/ I'm told her ta' iron my chopper, it just rough driv-

in' Oh Lord/ Cuz I gotta go/ I'm gonna ride that train they call the Cannonball.

Baby tell me what make you like to both holler and cry/ Stop me any time I come passin' by/ You gotta iron ma chopper, it's just rough drivin' Oh Lord/ I'm gonna ride that train they call the Cannonball.

I thought my baby was over in New Orleans/ But I found out later she was in sweet Bowlin' Green/ So ya betta' iron my chopper, rough drivin' Oh Lord/ I'm gonna ride that train they call the Cannonball.

9. All My Money's Gone

All of my money's gone, and there is no more in sight/ All of my money's gone, and there is no more in sight/ You people know I've got to do somethin'/ Really that is not right.

All my money gone, feel myself sinkin' down/ All my money gone, feel myself sinkin' down/ I really do believe that I'm on my last go-round./ Well a'right

Yeah I left my baby, left my baby I declare/ Yeah I left my baby, left my baby I declare/ I know I can't keep my baby if I don't get

some money from somewhere.

All of my money's gone, there's no more in sight/ —Ain't nothin' happenin' man/ All of my money's gone, there's no more in sight/ Look like I'm forced into to do somethin' really that is not right.

10. Woman in Elaine, Arkansas

I got a woman in Elaine, Arkansas/ Yes, I got a woman in Elaine, Arkansas/ She buy me them long toed shoes and keeps that brown mule in my jaw.

She come to town on a Saturday, gets there just about half past one/ Yeah she come to town every Saturday, just about one o'clock/ She helps the blind man across the street/ And then she makes all the joints reel and rock.

She balled all night Saturday night, all day Sunday 'til Sunday night about half past nine./ You can't keep the girl no longer, because Monday mornin' she got to rise and shine.

11. The Mistaken Life

Met a handsome stranger, persuaded her
to be my wife, yes to be my wife/ I met a
handsome stranger, persuaded her to be
my wife, yes to be my wife/ And I want
you people to know, I have made a mis-
take in life, yes a mistake in life.

I left her mother, standin' in the doorway
cryin', yes in the doorway cryin'/ Well, I
left her mother, standin' in the doorway
cryin', yes in the doorway cryin'/ She said
"Please Mr. don't you mistreat that little
girl of mine, only child of mine."

She cut my pleasure in two just the same
as she had a pocket knife, the girl had a
pocket knife/ Yes she cut my pleasure in
two just the same as she had a pocket
knife, she had a pocket knife/ I don't want
you young boys and girls to make my mis-
take in life, yes my mistake in life.

When it come down to gettin' married you
gotta speed and waltz and think twice, yes
speed and waltz and think twice,/ When it
come down to gettin' married you gotta
speed and waltz and think twice, speed
and waltz and think twice,/ Because if ya

ever make a mistake you're ruined the rest
of your life, prob'ly the best of your life./
Well, aren't I right!

12. The Sweet Root Man

I'm the sweet root man, try this potato of
mine/ Yes I'm the sweet root man, try this
sweet potato of mine/ I don't mind you
experimentin' but don't get tangled up in
my vine.

This here potato I'm talkin' about is mighty
sweet, and it ain't a little like a strain/ This
sweet potato I'm talkin' about is mighty
fine, and it ain't a little like a strain/ One
lady tried it the other day, says, "Sure is a
mellow thing."

It's the sweetest thing in the garden,
sweeter than the English pea/ Yeah it the
sweetest thing in the garden, even sweeter
than the English pea/ Try this sweet potato
o mine and you'll never let me be.

(spoken) That yella yam! Mighty fine pota-
to yes it is. Sweet potato that is!

13. The Thing

(spoken)
Yes indeed, they call this the thing, the
purple thing!/ Yes indeed, it's the thing!

Yes indeed, that mighty thing, the thing,
the purple thing!

Yeah now ya want to know what the thing
is. It's the thing that's all, the thing./ The
purple thing!

When you find out what the thing is you
come back and tell me./ All right, all right,
that's the \$64,000 question—heh, heh,
heh./ Yeah that thing! That purple thing!
Lord it make a fool outa Kilroy!

14. Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone

Please don't talk about me when I'm gone/
Though our friendships cease from now on/
If you can't say anything real nice/ Oh it's
better not to talk at all, that's my advice.

Now you go your way and I'll go mine, it's
the best that we do/ Now darlin' here's a
kiss, I hope that this bring a lotta love to
you.

Oh it makes no difference how I carry on,
remember/ Please don't talk about me
when I'm gone, well all right now!

Now you just go your way, and I think I'll
go your way too/ It's best that I do/ Here's
a kiss and I hope that this will bring a
lotta love to you/ Oh it makes no difference
how I carry on, remember darlin' please/
Don't talk about me when I'm gone.

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CREDITS

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About Smithsonian/Folkways

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original lp liner notes.

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10. Woman in Elaine, Arkansas (2:22)
11. The Mistaken Life (2:40)
12. The Sweet Root Man (2:32)
13. The Thing (3:42)
14. Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone (2:28)



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