

PHOTO BY BOB PARENT



LONNIE JOHNSON

The
Complete
Folkways
Recordings



Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings
Center for Folklife Programs and
Cultural Studies
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600
Smithsonian Institution
Washington DC 20560
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Recorded in 1967
Originally issued in 1982 as
Folkways 3577 and 3578
Notes by Sam Charters

1. Raise the Window High 2:35
2. Tears Don't Fall No More 3:08
3. Long Road to Travel 2:19
4. Old Rocking Chair 2:41
5. You Have My Life in Your Hands 2:35
6. Lazy Mood 3:08
7. Mister Trouble 3:25
8. How Deep Is the Ocean 2:16
9. Pouring Down Rain 2:20
10. Prisoner of Love 2:46
11. Careless Love 3:50
12. Juice Headed Baby 2:42
13. Teardrops in My Eyes 3:11
14. Looking for a Sweetie 3:46
15. I've Been a Fool Myself 2:30
16. What a Difference a Day Makes 2:28
17. That Lonesome Road 3:19
18. I Can't Believe 2:17
19. When You Always by Yourself 2:35
20. My Mother's Eyes 3:11
21. Summertime 2:11
22. C. C. Rider 2:26
23. The Entire Family Was Musicians 4:27
24. Falling Rain Blues 4:42

SMITHSONIAN/FOLKWAYS CD SF 40067



Though Lonnie Johnson is one of blues' most brilliant and influential guitarists, these rare Folkways sides reveal a powerfully emotive vocalist. Certainly these solo studio performances are marked by superb guitar accompaniment, however Lonnie Johnson the *singer* commands our attention here.



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1. **Raise the Window High** 2:35
2. **Tears Don't Fall No More** 3:08
3. **Long Road to Travel** 2:19
4. **Old Rocking Chair** 2:41
(Hoagy Carmichael/Hoagy Publishing Co., ASCAP)
5. **You Have My Life in Your Hands** 2:35
6. **Lazy Mood** 3:08
(Mercer & Miller/Michael H. Goldsen, Inc. & Mercer Music ASCAP)
7. **Mister Trouble** 3:25
8. **How Deep Is the Ocean** 2:16
(Irving Berlin/Irving Berlin Music Company, ASCAP)
9. **Pouring Down Rain** 2:20
10. **Prisoner of Love** 2:46
(Columbo, Gaskill, Robin/E.H. Morris & Co. Inc., Colgems EMI, Leo Robbins Music, ASCAP)
11. **Careless Love** 3:50
12. **Juice Headed Baby** 2:42
13. **Teardrops in My Eyes** 3:11
14. **Looking for a Sweetie** 3:46
15. **I've Been a Fool Myself** 2:30
16. **What a Difference a Day Makes** 2:28
(Adams & Grever/Stamley Adams Music, ASCAP and E. B. Marks, BMI)
17. **That Lonesome Road** 3:19
18. **I Can't Believe** 2:17
19. **When You Always by Yourself** 2:35
20. **My Mother's Eyes** 3:11
(Gilbert and Baer/EMI Feist Inc. & Abel Baer, Inc., ASCAP)
21. **Summertime** 2:11
(Gershwin and Heyward/Chappell & Co. & Gershwin Pub. Corp., ASCAP)
22. **C. C. Rider** 2:26
23. **The Entire Family Was Musicians** 4:27
24. **Falling Rain Blues** 4:42
(Lonnie Johnson/Trio Music, BMI)

Lonnie Johnson's Blues

When Lonnie Johnson had finished recording the songs on this album he talked for a while with Moses Asch of Folkways, who had done the recordings. Moe asked him if anyone was writing a biography of him and he answered with his usual pleasantness, no, he didn't know why but the writers always seemed to be looking for the wrong things from him. "They look for me mostly to tell the hardships of my life, instead of the best part of my life..."

At that time—the sessions were done in 1967—it was often difficult for writers who were interested in the blues to decide just where to put Lonnie Johnson and his music. Over his long and successful career he had not only made hundreds of successful blues recordings, but he had also been featured as guitar soloist with jazz groups of the quality of the Duke

Ellington Orchestra and Louis Armstrong's Hot Five. He had worked for extensive periods in night clubs with swing groups, he had toured extensively, and in the last phase of his career, for King Records in the 1950s, he became a sensitive and gifted performer of pop ballads. All of this was difficult to reconcile with the image of the blues singer that still is common among the white audiences—the image of the ragged drifter who learned his music out in the cotton fields.

The confusion about what he represented as a blues artist never seemed to concern Lonnie. In the book *The Country Blues*, (Sam Charters, 1959) his birth date was mistakenly given as 1889. He was actually born in 1899, on February 18, in New Orleans, so the book made him ten years older than he really was. He didn't seem to

have minded the mistake about his age, but he was never entirely comfortable about being included in a book about country blues singers. If he was asked about his own style he always answered, with some firmness, "urban blues."

In describing his life Lonnie said to Moe, "I had many a happy day..." and he did see himself as a fortunate man, but his early life had been marked with a tragedy that seemed to set a stamp on his early blues style. He was born into a large family, and he said that all of them were musicians. In 1915 all of the family except for himself, an older brother, and his mother, died of influenza. Out of this experience could have come some of the haunting loneliness that characterized many of his blues. What had eased the memory for him, though, was that his mother was still living in 1967, when he was talking with Moe Asch. She was 94 then, they still were very close, and she had a happy relationship with Lonnie's

daughter Brenda, her only grandchild. Lonnie ended his sentence "I had many a happy day..." with a heartfelt, "...and she's the cause of it."

What is most interesting about Lonnie and his long career as a musician is that he thought of himself as a blues singer at all. He had grown up learning to play the violin and guitar, and as a teenager he spent two years in London working with a musical review. When he returned to the United States in the early 1920s he moved to St. Louis and his first work as a musician was with the Charlie Creath Orchestra. It wasn't until he won a blues contest at a St. Louis theatre in 1925 that he became known as a blues singer. On some of his early recordings he still played the violin. Lonnie was an unusually gifted musician, and his approach to the form of the blues was so casual that he once said that during one period of his career he had copyrighted 148 songs, all of them with the same melody.

Lonnie's recordings were always marked by the brilliance of his guitar playing, by his sensitive singing, and by the distinctiveness of his song texts. It isn't surprising that for most of his career he was one of the biggest-selling artists in the blues. In these recordings, even though he was returning to themes and emotions that had been part of his music for more than forty years, his skills as a writer were undiminished. Perhaps the characteristic that most distinguishes his best texts is his ability to sustain a metaphor over a number of verses. A blues is usually put together out of verses that are linked by a theme, but have no consistent image from verse to verse. Lonnie, however, was often able to shape the movement and direction of the text around one dominant symbol or idea. One of his most effective devices is a personification of an element in the text. In his well-known version of *Careless Love*, which he recorded again here, he subtly turned the descriptive

term "careless love" into a shadowy human figure.

*Careless love worried my mother until she died/
Careless love it worried my poor daddy until he lost his mind/
Now darn you, I'm goin' to shoot you, shoot you four, five times./
And stand over you until you finish dyin'.*

*Then I'll dig your grave, I'll dig it with a silver spade./
I'll dig your grave, I'll dig it with a silver spade./
And I'll bury your body out on some hillside close to Cedar Grove/
Six feet in your grave where nothin' will ever be told.*

Often his songs reflected the blues' common dark streak of misogyny. He sang many verses like,

*Men, if you single, pray to God you stay that way/
Men, if you single, pray to God you stay that way/
'Cause women don't want a good man, only just to pass the time away.*

Or,

*You can give a woman plenty diamonds,
you can dress her from her head on down,
You can give a woman plenty diamonds,
you can dress her from her had on down,
She tell everbody she got a fool, it's the talk
of the town.*

There were only occasional moments when he dropped the tone and sang about a relationship that had some honesty or happiness. This doesn't mean that his life was a series of unhappy love affairs. Despite all that has been written about blues singers and their "honesty," most of the blues is metaphoric—which means that the singer is only reflecting the mood of the audience. As Otis Rush expressed it, "If you're honest you can take on that other man's troubles." At the height of his career Lonnie was expressing the unhappiness of the thousands of people who were buying his records.

Several of the songs on this album are ballads, and it was his ballads that

distressed part of his new audience in the 1960s. Sometimes he presented them as an acknowledged part of a performance or recording, but more often he simply inserted a group of sentimental pop ballads, whether anybody was expecting them or not. For the people who had come to a club to listen to the blues in an effort to get away from the pop culture, songs like *Prisoner of Love* or *My Mother's Eyes* were a little confusing. Lonnie, for his part, loved the ballads, and he was one of the finest ballad singers around. Most of his last singles for King Records had included ballads, and during the 1940s, when he was a club entertainer, he sang almost as many ballads as he did blues. So he continued to sing them, and let the audience do what they wanted with them. Listening to them now it is obvious that in the ballads he found a counterbalance to the cynicism of the blues. The sentimentality and the tenderness he rejected in the blues are there in the verses of the ballads.

These are not Lonnie's last recordings, but they are certainly the finest group of songs he did before he died of a stroke in 1970. Moe Asch had recorded him in the 1940s for his Disc label, and there was a comfortable rapport between them. Lonnie felt at ease to stretch out with the guitar solos, and he was relaxed enough to sing any song he chose. At the same time he was taking the recording very seriously, since the tapes were supposed to be a demo for a later session with Verve Records. He was in superb form for the sessions, compellingly inventive, musical and lyric, sketching in the emotional turmoils of his urban blues world with sure and telling strokes, accompanying himself with a display of guitar technique that seemed to have become only more supple and assured with the passing years.

So much else was going on in the 1960s that it isn't surprising that the tapes from the session were put on a shelf in

Moe's office and forgotten for fifteen years. They turned up when he was getting ready to move Folkways down to a new office in Soho. He handed them to me one day and said, "See what you can do with these." He hadn't listened to them since he had done the recording. What I found when I began listening was a superb portrait of a great bluesman. There is so much to Lonnie and he recorded in so many different settings that it's difficult to say that one or another facet of his music is "definitive," but here in these songs is some of the finest blues he ever recorded. No one who knows Lonnie Johnson's music could ask for anything more.

Sam Charters, 1992

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Discography

- Blues and Ballads* (previously Bluesville 1011) Fantasy/OBC OBC-531
- Blues By* (previously Prestige/Bluesville 1007) Fantasy/OBC OBC-502
- Idle Hours* (previously Bluesville 1044) Fantasy/OBC OBC-518
- Mr. Johnson's Blues* Mamlish 3807
- Steppin' on the Blues* Columbia C-46221
- The Originator of Modern Guitar Blues* Blues Boy 300
- Losing Game* (previously Bluesville 1024) Fantasy/OBC OBC-543
- Tomorrow Night* Starday 5039
- Lonnie Johnson 1926-40* Blues Documents 2064
- Lonnie Johnson 1926-42* Document 546
- Woke Up This Morning...Blues in My Fingers, Vol. 1, 1926-28* Matchbox 1006
- Woke Up This Morning...Blues in My Fingers, Vol. 2, 1927-32* Matchbox 1013
- Swingin' with Lonnie* Storyville 4042
- The Blues of Lonnie Johnson* Swaggie 1225
- Eddie Lang and Lonnie Johnson* Swaggie 1229

You Can Hear the Blues on Folkways

Between 1949 and 1987 Folkways Records issued dozens of blues recordings. All of them are available on high-quality audio cassette. For a free catalog, write to *The Whole Folkways Catalogue*, Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies, 955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600, Washington, D.C. 20560; phone 202/287-3262; fax 202/287-3699.

Smithsonian/Folkways blues reissues feature remastered sound, new notes and/or previously unreleased material. Some recent Smithsonian/Folkways blues issues are:

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Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs SF40023

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Brownie McGhee: The Folkways Years SF40034

Reverend Gary Davis: Pure Religion and Bad Company SF40035

Dave Van Ronk: The Folkways Years SF40041

About Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1947 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.

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings was

formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes, recordings to accompany published books, and a variety of other educational projects.

The Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies. They are one of the means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

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