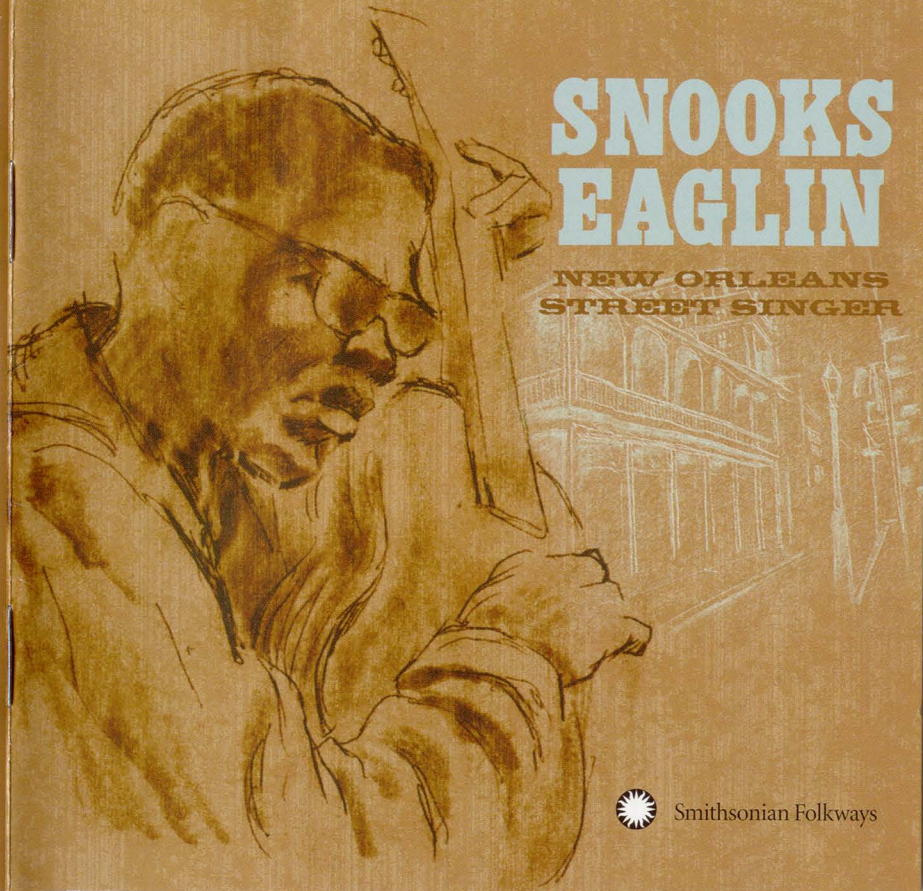




Smithsonian Folkways

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SNOOKS EAGLIN

NEW ORLEANS
STREET SINGER



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1. Looking for a Woman 2:25
(Jimmy McCracklin/EMI Unart, BMI)
2. Walking Blues* 2:58
(Sam Hopkins/Tradition Music, admin. by Bug, BMI)
3. Careless Love 2:32
4. Saint James Infirmary 2:20
5. High Society 1:33
(Armand Piron—Clarence Williams/
Universal MCA Music Publishing, BMI)
6. I Got My Questionnaire 3:20
7. Let Me Go Home, Whiskey 2:52
(Shifty Henry/EMI UNART Catalog Inc, BMI)
8. Mama, Don't Tear My Clothes* 2:07
9. Trouble in Mind 2:46
(Richard M. Jones/Universal MCA Music
Publishing, BMI)
10. The Lonesome Road 1:46
(Gene Austin—Nathaniel Shilkret/Famous Music
Corp.—Nathaniel Shilkret Music Co., ASCAP)
11. Helping Hand (A Thousand Miles
Away from Home) 2:11
(Dave Bartholomew—Antoine Domino/
APRS Music, BMI)
12. One Room Country Shack* 3:02
(Mercy Dee Walton/Sony—ATV Songs LLC, BMI)
13. Who's Been Foolin' You* 2:22
(Arthur Crudup/Unichappell Music Inc., BMI)
14. Drifting Blues* 3:37
(Charles Brown—Johnny Moore—Eddie Williams—
C. Mose Music/EMI Unart Catalog Inc., BMI)
15. Sophisticated Blues 2:06
(Snooks Eaglin)
16. Come Back, Baby* 2:06
(Walter Davis)
17. Rock Island Line 2:03
18. See See Rider 3:08
19. One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer 2:42
(Rudolph Toombs/Unichappell Music, BMI)
20. Mean Old World 3:46
(Aaron Walker/Lord and Walker Publishing, BMI)
21. Mean Old Frisco 2:32
(Arthur Crudup/Crudup Music, BMI)
22. Every Day I Have the Blues 3:52
(Peter Chatman/Arc Music Corp.—Fort Knox
Music Inc.—Trio Music Co. Inc., BMI)
23. Careless Love 2* 2:30
24. Drifting Blues 2 3:47
25. The Lonesome Road 2* 1:27

*previously unreleased

A black and white photograph of Snooks Eaglin, a man with a mustache and sunglasses, wearing a plaid shirt. He is playing an acoustic guitar and looking down at it. The background is a textured wall.

SNOOKS EAGLIN

**NEW ORLEANS
STREET SINGER**

Elijah Wald

When Folkways Records released New Orleans Street Singer, in 1959, it set the small world of folk and acoustic blues fans on fire. No one had ever heard a guitarist like Snooks Eaglin, and he was instantly elevated to the pantheon of eccentric, uncategorizable virtuosos alongside Joseph Spence, Folkways' other great discovery of the late 1950s.

As would frequently be pointed out in later years, Eaglin's fame as an acoustic bluesman was founded to a large degree on a misunderstanding. He was a hip New Orleans rhythm-and-blues musician who had been working with electric bands since he was 12 years old, and to market him as a street-singing folk artist was a classic example of folk-revival romanticism. However, critics who have suggested that these recordings show Eaglin at a disadvantage are equally wrongheaded. While his acoustic sides are not typical of his live performances, they are astonishing musical documents, showcasing his virtuosity, range, and brilliance as an arranger in a way that his band recordings cannot match. He has done a lot of great work since he made this album, but in some respects this remains his most exciting artistic statement.

BIOGRAPHY

Though he was only 22 years old when he made these sides, Eaglin was already a seasoned professional. His early biography was outlined by the folklorist Kenneth Goldstein in the original album notes:

Snooks was born in New Orleans in 1936, and has lived there all his life. When only 19 months old, it was discovered that he had both glaucoma and a brain tumor. Immediate surgery, and a stay in the hospital for more than two-and-a-half years of treatment, saved his life although doctors had given up hope of his recovering. But somehow he managed to survive....

For Snooks's sixth birthday, his father, Fird Eaglin, gave him a small guitar. Listening to the radio and to recordings, young Snooks taught himself to play the instrument, a difficult feat even for sighted individuals. Later, he sang in local Baptist churches; and, at the age of eleven, playing "Twelfth Street Rag" on the guitar, he won first prize on a Negro talent hour over station WNOE.

Like his father, Eaglin was formally named Fird (he says he has no idea where the name came from), but he was soon dubbed "Snooks," because he was a mischievous child like Fanny Brice's "Baby Snooks" character, whom the family heard on the radio. Eaglin's father played harmonica, and the two of them would jam together and make home recordings, first on an acetate disc cutter and later on a reel-to-reel tape machine. As a result, Eaglin had an opportunity to study and refine his sound in a way that was rare in the days before cassette recorders became common home accessories. He was also interacting with other musicians, including the cream of the Crescent City's young R&B players. In a 1995 *Living Blues* magazine interview with the New Orleans journalist Ben Sandmel, he recalled gigging in a band with the pianist Eddie Bo when he was ten years old, and in 1954 he played guitar on Sugarboy Crawford's "Jock-A-Mo" (the original recording of the song better known as "Iko Iko").

By that time, Eaglin was a regular member of the Flamingos, a popular local band led by the pianist Allen Toussaint, a fellow teenager who would become one of the most important songwriters and producers in New Orleans history. Like their main competition, Art Neville's Hawkettes, the Flamingos were a general-business dance band. As Goldstein wrote in 1959, "The music they perform for their audiences is that which is currently most in demand: rhythm and blues, hillbilly, and most recently, rock-and-roll."

It seems unlikely that the Flamingos played many hillbilly tunes, but on his own, Eaglin ranged much farther afield, not only singing country numbers, but playing jazz and Latin instrumentals, as well as old folk and blues tunes that would have been of no interest to hip young dance crowds. When he didn't have a dance gig, he would sometimes play on the streets of the French Quarter, and one day, on the sidewalk in front of Krauss's department store, he caught the ear of Harry Oster, an amateur folklorist from New England. Oster had moved south in 1955 to teach in the English department at Louisiana State University. He shortly formed the Louisiana Folklore Society, and then a small record label, Folk-Lyric, to release recordings he made around the region, including some at Angola State Prison, where he first recorded Robert Pete Williams, one of the greatest blues "discoveries" of the post-war period. Oster recognized that Eaglin was an extraordinary artist, and recorded dozens of his songs. The first cull of these was released by Folkways, and Oster went on to issue some on Folk-Lyric and license others to small labels in the United States and Europe.

Through Oster's recordings, Eaglin became a legend in folk and folk-blues circles, but he never had any interest in working as a solo, acoustic artist. Brilliant as he was in this format, he preferred to have a rhythm section behind him, and considered himself part of the New Orleans R&B scene. Within a couple of years of meeting Oster, he was making recordings that were much more to his taste: in 1960, he hooked up with Dave Bartholomew, the trumpeter, songwriter, bandleader, arranger, and producer who was behind Fats Domino's long run of hits as well as hundreds of other local recordings. The string of records Eaglin made under Bartholomew's supervision for Imperial Records over the next three years are classic slices of Crescent City R&B, though none of them broke out to make him a national

hitmaker. As a result—and because of his growing distrust of the record business—for most of the next quarter century he was absent from the studio, though he continued to play regular gigs as both a frontman and an accompanist around New Orleans. (For three years in the early sixties, he even had a residency at the local Playboy Club.) There were two sessions in the 1970s, made under the supervision of the blues scholar Sam Charters, but though they had some wonderful moments, neither of them captured the quirky virtuosity of the Oster records or the rocking power of the Imperials.

Then, in the mid-1980s, as part of a new interest in the New Orleans sound fostered by the Jazz and Heritage Festival, Eaglin began a series of albums for Black Top, a local record company. He developed a close relationship with the label's owner, Hammond Scott, and they put together bands of top New Orleans players who were familiar with the intricate twists of his imagination. These sides for the first time captured the bizarre and rollicking range of his legendary live performances, and though Black Top eventually ran its course, Eaglin has continued to work with Scott, most recently on the Money Pit label. He also performs regularly around New Orleans, drawing adoring fans to gigs at Mid City Lanes, a combination bowling alley and barroom, where he holds court roughly once a month. His sets are as wild and unpredictable as ever, and he still takes requests for whatever the audience wants to hear, as he was doing when Oster first heard him. He also continues to play acoustic guitar on occasion, in the same style heard on this album, but only at parties for small groups of friends. On stage, he says the crowds are too noisy, and it is too much work to carry the whole thing by himself.

The Flamingos, c. 1953. (l to r) Allen Toussaint (at piano), Walter Lang, Benjamin Gregory, Frank Morton, Ferdinand Bigeou, James Jackson (on drums), and Snooks Eaglin.



THE MUSIC

Along with his astonishing instrumental virtuosity, what has always been most distinctive about Eaglin is the breadth of his repertoire. Allen Toussaint called him a “human jukebox,” and on Oster’s recordings he ranges from traditional African-American folk-songs and early blues standards to cowboy yodeling, gospel, jazz, pseudo-flamenco, and the latest R&B hits. In a typical performance today, he will segue from Fats Domino into surf guitar, Stevie Wonder, classical quotations, funk, and even heavy metal or oddities like the New Vaudeville Band’s “Winchester Cathedral.”

Thus he was far from a typical Folkways artist. The label had been formed primarily to preserve working-class folk culture, and as folklorists, both Oster and Goldstein did their best to fit Eaglin into this bag. As Goldstein’s notes indicate, this was not an easy task, and it produced some fruitful meditations about the whole “folk process”:

Snooks’s personal repertoire . . . was learned almost entirely from listening to the radio and recordings. And it is in this respect that he differs most radically from the street singers of earlier years. Most of the repertoire of the legendary street singers was drawn from oral sources, or was composed on traditional themes by the performers themselves. To be sure, some part of Snooks’s repertoire is made up of self-composed or orally-circulated pieces. But the greatest part of his vast stock of songs was learned from two sources which most folklorists consider to be the bane of tradition—radio and recordings. One wonders, however, upon listening to Snooks’ performances, if such is indeed the case.

All too little research has been done in the area of studying the effects of commercial and standardized media upon tradition. Some recent research by scholars in the fields of ‘hillbilly’ and ‘race’ recordings indicate that a large percentage of songs collected from traditional singers during the 1930s and ‘40s may actually have originated from, or been put back into, tradition by recorded performances. Depth interviewing of traditional singers, in an attempt to discover the source of their material, would probably have resulted in finding that many singers learned at least some of their songs from recordings and radio, or from others who had added to their repertoire in that manner.



Scholars have readily recognized the part which printed media (such as the broadsides and songsters of the 19th century and earlier) have played on traditional songs and their circulation. It is time the same recognition was made of the effect of radio and recordings in starting material into oral circulation.

Whatever folk may mean, Eaglin was always first and foremost a professional entertainer. Whether working on the streets, in the dance clubs, or today at the Mid-City Rock 'n' Bowl, he has always cheerfully filled requests and consistently "given the people what they want." He has personal preferences of course—in interviews, he has expressed distaste for such disparate figures as Al Jolson and the Beatles, while adding that he nonetheless can play their hits—but he has absorbed material from virtually every decade of the 20th century, and seems to have an infinite memory, not only for songs, but for specific instrumental solos from hit records.

As a child of the record and radio era, Eaglin seems always to have thought not in terms of songs, but in terms of record hits. When Oster asked for the sources of the songs on this album, Eaglin ascribed even the New Orleans standard "Saint James Infirmary" to a specific recording, by the trumpeter Oran "Hot Lips" Page. Oster encouraged Eaglin to play older songs, like "Careless Love" and "Rock Island Line," but the bulk of the repertoire, even on these acoustic sessions, was drawn from the R&B mainstream.

While this was true of Oster's recordings in general, it was particularly true of the songs selected for the Folkways release—possibly because the record was originally prepared for Elektra, a more commercially oriented label. Moe Asch, the founder and owner of Folkways, would presumably have been happy to release the sort of material that Oster presented on Eaglin's Folk-Lyric album, which consisted of more traditional, countrified songs. Elektra would have been looking for an heir to Josh White, an uptown blues singer who could reach the folk crowd, and the songs chosen for this LP leaned heavily to blues standards like "See See Rider" and "Every Day I Have the Blues." Why the album ended up being released by Folkways rather than Elektra, no one recalls.

With his keen sense of the music business, Eaglin's choices of songs provide a revealing

insight into what "blues" meant to black listeners in the 1940s and 1950s. Today blues is overwhelmingly associated with Mississippi and Chicago, but in Eaglin's youth the focus was on the Southwest. A generation of African Americans from Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana had moved out to the West Coast, drawn by wartime jobs and California's golden promise, and the musicians who traveled with them defined modern blues: T-Bone Walker and Charles Brown set a standard of sophisticated, soulful singing, and were followed by people like Lloyd Glenn, Joe Liggins, and Ivory Joe Hunter. Later artists like Ray Charles, B. B. King, and Fats Domino, built on this foundation, and by far the majority of blues songs Eaglin recorded had been chart successes for West Coast singers—most of them pianists fronting small, jazz-flavored combos.

Asked by Oster to provide sources for each number, Eaglin listed a representative slice of the era's recording stars: Johnny Moore's Three Blazers, Amos Milburn, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Lil Green, Jimmy McCracklin, and Lowell Fulson. (Oster and Goldstein, apparently oblivious to the R&B charts, transcribed the last name as "Lowe Froeson.") Charles was also an obvious influence, and it is no surprise to learn that, for a while in the mid-1950s, Eaglin was sometimes billed as "Li'l Ray Charles."

Considering Eaglin's tastes, his preference for working with bands, and the fact that he has never made an acoustic recording except when it was demanded by a folk-record label (and those almost fifty years ago), it is not surprising that many of his present-day fans have underrated or even dismissed his solo work, complaining that Oster inappropriately tried "to reduce Snooks to a solo 'street-performer' type of attraction," in the words of the poet and historian John Sinclair. However, neither artists nor their biggest fans are necessarily the best judges of their talent, and the music on this set proves how much would have been lost had Eaglin never recorded in this format.

If there has ever been a guitarist who didn't need any back-up players, it is Snooks Eaglin. Great as his band recordings have been, it is only in the solo format that he could display some of his most distinctive talents. A piece like "High Society" arose from his

need to conjure up an instrumental ensemble with nothing but six strings and ten fingers, and every cut on this set shows a similarly acute understanding of the strengths and the limitations of the guitar—even as he routinely goes beyond any previous player's limitations. In this sense, Eaglin's work invites comparison with that of another New Orleans eccentric, the pianist James Booker, who was similarly paired with bands for most of his career, but when playing alone would range from blues to swing to Chopin, covering Liberace and Lead Belly in a single set. In both cases, bands gave them a welcome power and solidity, but inhibited some of their most brilliant and distinctive departures.

To range farther afield, there is a sense in which Eaglin's only peer was the young José Feliciano—another prodigy who mixed flamenco guitar techniques with Ray Charles-flavored vocals, and seemed never to have forgotten anything he had heard on the radio. Feliciano would go on to be a far bigger star, but his first recordings are as bizarrely heterogeneous as Eaglin's, and he was the only other guitarist even nominally connected with the folk revival who could aspire to similar virtuosity. However, at least as regards his English-language recordings, the teenaged Feliciano never seemed to have a single, solid musical foundation; growing up in New York, he assimilated a wide range of sounds, which pulled him in a hundred directions at once. Eaglin, by contrast, was one hundred percent a product of his place and time.

While New Orleans patriots have sometimes exaggerated the city's importance in American musical history, exaggeration is no easy feat. The city's mix of French, Spanish, English, Italian, Irish, and African populations, combined with its close connection to the Afro-Caribbean islands (most importantly Haiti), gave it a wealth of musical roots. Its social structure—a tangled mess, combining its function as a port, its Catholicism, its particularly complex racial stratifications, and its thriving entertainment (some would say vice) district—made it a musical melting pot unlike any other American city. Lonnie Johnson, the first great male blues star and father of jazz guitar, recalled that when he was playing on the city's streets as a member of a family string band, they played “ragtime



melodies, sweet songs, waltzes. . . . A lot of people liked opera, so we did some of that too." Jelly Roll Morton would likewise cite opera as a source, claiming that "Tiger Rag" was reshaped from French operatic strains. Meanwhile, the legendary drumming sessions in Congo Square and constant interaction with the nearby island cultures kept African rhythms fresher and healthier than in the Protestant, inland states. Thus the sound of early jazz—for some years a virtual New Orleans monopoly—and a defensible claim to be the birthplace of the twelve-bar blues.

In the swing era, the spotlight shifted to New York and the Midwest, and in the 1940s Los Angeles's sophisticated R&B scene took the lead, but the 1950s found New Orleans once again at the center of a black musical universe. Fats Domino—too rarely given his full due as a creator of rock n' roll—was the most visible exponent, and outsiders like Little Richard and Ray Charles found some of their greatest inspiration in the city's recording studios. The local talent included Lloyd Price, Smiley Lewis, Huey "Piano" Smith, Guitar Slim, and Professor Longhair, along with some of the finest rhythm sections and horn players in the world. Dave Bartholomew ran a hit factory that would be supplanted in the early 1960s by Allen Toussaint's new generation of funk pioneers, including the Meters/Neville Brothers. And then there were Earl King, Lee Dorsey, Ernie K-Doe, Irma Thomas.

Eaglin always aspired to be included in that list, and on the local scene, that is where he finds himself today—recognized as a pillar of the golden age of New Orleans R&B. It takes nothing away from that fact to add that, back in the late 1950s, his solo recordings forever changed the conception of what can be done with an acoustic guitar—or even to grant that in some ways these remain his most distinctive and astonishing work.

Just listen to this album's previously unissued version of "Drifting Blues." Eaglin starts off playing a straightforward twelve-bar pattern, but soon his chords and harmonies are moving in startling directions, apparently as the mood strikes him, in a way that would have been impossible with even the most expert accompanists. Or, to choose a more typical piece, check out his Latin-flavored reworking of "I'm Looking for a Woman." It is an

arrangement that any New Orleans band could easily lock into, but would that improve it? From Eaglin's point of view, a solid foundation of bass and drums would give him some different options, as both a guitar soloist and a singer, but then this would be just another fine R&B side. As it stands, no one else has ever managed a performance even faintly like this. The arrangement is revolutionary, the execution flawless. There is no sense of anything missing, and every sense that one is hearing a startlingly innovative and commanding artist, the only guitarist to fully capture the second-line swing that has made New Orleans pianists legendary around the world.

Eaglin's reputation essentially rests on this uniqueness as a player. This is not to devalue his vocal talents; the blues historian Pete Welding has written that "the heartrending melancholy of his singing must be heard to be believed," and this is balanced by an infectious exuberance on his upbeat numbers. But while the power and sensitivity of his voice entrances blues fans, it was his dazzling guitar arrangements that made him a legend in the late 1950s, and it is the flamenco *rasgueados* and lightning-quick, constantly surprising lead runs that remain the most thrilling aspect of his work. Or maybe it is unfair to separate one from the other. What is so powerful about his performances is the way the voice and the guitar work in tandem, one filled with sensitive, warm introspection, the other commenting with biting verve and humor. Alone with his guitar, he can shift the dynamics from note to note, control every breath and filigree, and shape intimate, improvisatory masterpieces.

By now, Snooks Eaglin's career has stretched over more than half a century, and his reputation is secure. Alone or with a band, in the 1950s or in the 21st century, he is one of the great artists in American music. We are extraordinarily fortunate that at a moment when he was not famous, a folklorist sat him down in front of a tape recorder and preserved a stage that he would soon leave behind. He would go on to make a lot of very different, very exciting music, but this album shows him at the peak of his early powers—and neither he nor anyone else has ever made another like it.

SONG NOTES

1. Looking for a Woman

Eaglin learned this song from a record by the pianist-singer Jimmy McCracklin. Born in St. Louis, McCracklin was one of the generation of blues artists who moved west in the 1940s, recording for a string of small R&B labels in Los Angeles and the Bay Area with his Blues Blasters. "Looking for a Woman," recorded in 1951, was among his first hits, popular enough that he followed it up with "I Found That Woman." McCracklin reached his biggest success in 1958, with "The Walk," and shared writing credit with Lowell Fulson on "Tramp," a hit for Otis Redding and Carla Thomas.

In Eaglin's hands, though, the song is pure New Orleans flamenco—a genre he invented, and of which he remains the sole exponent. The rolling, Latin dance beat combines with guitaristic touches that range from complex rhythm playing to flashy leads that inspired the British guitarist Alexis Korner to write that "the ferocity of his runs has a flavour of [Django] Reinhardt." Like James Booker or Professor Longhair—both of whom he would record with in later years—Eaglin has created something that is entirely of its time and place, and yet utterly sui generis.

2. Walking Blues*

If the previous track was a brilliant manifesto of individuality, this one shows Eaglin's immersion in the classic Southwestern blues style. "Walking Blues" was Lightnin' Hopkins's late 1940s reworking of "Drifting Blues," the Three Blazers' trendsetting West Coast nightclub hit, and it is interesting to compare Eaglin's performance on this track with his two versions of that song. From the opening guitar phrase, it is obvious that he still has Hopkins's version playing in his head. There is the same relaxed, knowing vocal inflection, and several of the Texas blues master's favorite licks punctuate the verses, while the monotonic bass carries no hint that the same player could tear off a spectacular Crescent City rumba.

Hopkins was an anomaly on the forties blues scene, practically the only artist to get hits while recording solo with an acoustic guitar, so it is no surprise that Eaglin should gravitate toward his material when working in this format. There also were close links between the Texas and Louisiana blues scenes—Hopkins was related, at least by marriage, to the zydeco master Clifton Chenier, and Louisianans and Texans were major contributors to the West Coast blues style.

3. Careless Love

According to the original notes, Eaglin compiled this from various record and radio performances, which makes perfect sense. It is hard to come up with another song that crossed as many boundaries as this American standard, which was recorded ad infinitum by white Appalachian balladeers, country-blues guitarists like Blind Boy Fuller and Josh White, urban stars like Bessie Smith and Lonnie Johnson, and an array of New Orleans jazz players that included King Oliver, Kid Ory, and the Original Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra—and that's not to mention all the people who did W. C. Handy's rewrite, "Loveless Love."

Eaglin's version is unusual for its mix of wistful vocals and propulsive, showy guitar—though not as showy as on his alternate recording of the same tune (track 23). The original Folkways LP led off with this track, and it is easy to see why: It was familiar enough even for the Burl Ives crowd, while for the cognoscenti Eaglin as usual made it into something new and interesting.

4. Saint James Infirmary

One of the most pervasive and well-studied songs in the American folk repertoire, this can be traced back to an Anglo-Irish ballad, and is now performed in New Orleans clubs with hip-hop beats and lines about cell phones. People interested in its origins and early travels can get the full picture from *The Unfortunate Rake* (FW 03805), an album Kenneth Goldstein compiled for Folkways in 1960, which includes more than a dozen variants of the song. Eaglin credited a Hot Lips Page recording as the source for his version, which cuts the song down to a basic three verses—the way it is still typically sung around New Orleans.

5. High Society

This was the piece that made Eaglin a legend among guitarists. It was a familiar New Orleans jazz standard, credited to the violinist and bandleader Armand Piron and the pianist Clarence Williams, who had a publishing partnership in the 1920s. No one had ever attempted a piece of this sort as a guitar solo, and Eaglin turned it into a showcase for his flamboyant technique and his cleverness as an arranger. Note the surprising use of flamenco rolls in the second section.

Goldstein's notes said, "Snooks attempts to simulate the various instrumental solo breaks, disregarding the very limits of the guitar itself." Alexis Korner, a British critic and blues musician, was harsher, noting that "the swing is tremendous," and "taking trombone parts, slapped bass breaks, and a fragment of the traditional clarinet solo in his stride, Eaglin very nearly brings it off," but overall it is "one of the most magnificent failures that I have ever heard." The difference was that Goldstein was immersed in folk culture, but Korner had worked in traditional jazz bands and couldn't help noticing the parts of the tune that Eaglin had left out. Indeed, it is not a fully realized jazz performance, but it remains one of the most joyous and startling guitar instrumentals on record. (And there are very few clarinet players in New Orleans—or anywhere else—who can play that high-note solo as well as Eaglin does here.)

6. I Got My Questionnaire

The original notes said that Eaglin learned this song from a Clarence Burton recording, but Burton was an actor, not a musician, so this is puzzling. Some of Eaglin's lyrics had appeared in various blues recorded during World War II and later, including Hot Lips Page's "Uncle Sam's Blues," Brownie McGhee's "Million Lonesome Women," and Arthur Crudup's "Give Me a 32-20" (which gives the lyric an ironic twist by following the "questionnaire" line—like Eaglin, he pronounces it "questionnairee"—with "Now if I be a murderer, don't have to break the county law"). This is one of Eaglin's most powerful slow-blues performances, his voice more forceful than usual, and his guitar snapping and growling its responses.

7. Let Me Go Home, Whiskey

Like everyone else, Eaglin learned this from Amos Milburn, one of the most unfairly overlooked giants of early R&B. A pianist from Houston, Milburn moved to Los Angeles in the 1940s in search of the success that had greeted Texas keyboard bluesmen Charles Brown and Ivory Joe Hunter. He did all right with the sort of ballads that had been the hallmark of their sound, but came into his own when he shifted to more party-friendly material, and his rolling piano and good-time vocals became a model for Fats Domino and many others. "Let Me Go Home, Whiskey," a hit from 1953, was one of a string of whiskey songs that followed Milburn's hugely popular "Bad, Bad Whiskey," and included "One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer." Eaglin's performance has a sly, easy swing, which seems to be winking at the plea in the lyric.

8. Mama, Don't Tear My Clothes*

Though it sounds kind of countrified and folksy in Eaglin's version, this song was a favorite of the hottest Chicago blues bands in the late 1930s, recorded a half-dozen times by the likes of Washboard Sam, the Harlem Hamfats, and the State Street Swingers with Big Bill Broonzy. It later turned up in versions by the Texans Smokey Hogg and Lightnin' Hopkins (though the latter only in 1961)—which suggests that it remained in the repertoires of numerous performers around the South. It seems to have been inspired by Memphis Minnie's record, "Can I Do It for You," and spawned a variant, "Mama, Let Me Lay It on You," which was recorded by Blind Boy Fuller and went on to become a folk standard after Eric Von Schmidt changed it to "Baby, Let Me Follow You Down" and taught it to Bob Dylan.

Harry Oster encouraged Eaglin to record rural-flavored and old-fashioned material, and while this song stands out on this album, there is quite a lot of similar-sounding material on Snooks's other acoustic recordings from this period, especially those released by Oster on the Folk-Lyric label. These are currently available on the Arhoolie CD *Country Boy Down in New Orleans*.

9. Trouble in Mind

This was one of the most popular blues numbers of the 1920s, written by the pianist Richard M. Jones, and recorded by various “blues queens.” Eaglin gave his source as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the gospel singer-guitarist who broke out of the church to become a major radio and record star in the early 1940s and a formative influence on rockabilly players like Carl Perkins and Scotty Moore. Tharpe recorded very few secular songs, but she did this one in 1943 with the Lucky Millinder Orchestra, and it was reissued in 1950 to cash in on the R&B boom. Tharpe’s raw, hot guitar licks were clearly an inspiration for Eaglin’s playing, though this particular song bears little resemblance to her version, which was much more upbeat.

10. The Lonesome Road

Eaglin did not give a source for this song, but it was very likely Rosetta Tharpe again, since most singers performed this as a slow ballad, while she recorded two upbeat versions in the early forties, one solo and one with Millinder’s band. “The Lonesome Road” was composed in the 1920s by Gene Austin, one of the “crooners” who revolutionized American music with their soft, microphone-friendly style. Born in Texas and raised in Louisiana, Austin was known as “The Voice of the Southland,” and had one of the first multimillion-selling records with “My Blue Heaven,” which Fats Domino later made into a New Orleans R&B standard. His compositions included “When My Sugar Walks down the Street” and “How Come You Do Me Like You Do?” and the pop standards he introduced included “Melancholy Baby” and “Girl of My Dreams.”

“The Lonesome Road” was intended to sound like a traditional spiritual—it was presented as such in the original film of *Showboat*—and to a great extent is a compilation of folk phrases, many of which turn up in other songs. After Austin’s success, it was recorded by Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Les Paul and Mary Ford, Stevie Wonder, and many others. In general, it was sung with doleful melancholy, but Eaglin makes it into an exuberant flagwaver.

11. Helping Hand (A Thousand Miles Away from Home)

This is a perfect example of the folk and R&B repertoires coming together. An old hobo song, sometimes called “Danville Girl,” was shaped by Jimmie Rodgers into the country classic “Waiting for a Train.” Then the ultimate New Orleans hit machine—Dave Bartholomew producing Fats Domino—reshaped it for a 1955 single on Imperial Records. (According to some reports, Rodgers’s estate took them to court, but no evidence of such a case has surfaced.) Snooks plays it with Domino’s 12/8 rock beat, but his acoustic guitar brings it partway back into the folk fold.

The affinity between blues and country music, often obscured by the segregation of record catalogs and radio charts, has always been noted by musicians on both sides of the racial divide. Rodgers’s records were popular with black audiences, as were Gene Autry’s a few years later. This was probably most true in rural areas, but the cowboy mystique captured a lot of city dwellers too—witness Herb Jeffries, who took time off from the Duke Ellington Orchestra to make films like *The Bronze Buckaroo* and *Harlem Rides the Range*. Tampa Red and the Mississippi Sheiks recorded Rodgers imitations, and Howlin’ Wolf sometimes said that his trademark “howl” was an attempt to pick up on Rodgers’s “blue yodel.” As for Eaglin, he has always taken pride in his ability to play any style that came his way, and on another of the Oster recordings, “Give Me That Good Old Boxcar” (available on the Arhoolie CD), he proved that he could sing straightforwardly in the Rodgers style, hillbilly guitar, yodeling, and all.

12. One Room Country Shack*

This was a big hit in the early 1950s, by yet another West Coast-based Texan blues pianist, Mercy Dee Walton. It is interesting how few distinctively New Orleans touches Eaglin retains on slow blues numbers like this one. Like everyone else in the South, he was listening to the Texans, and the debt to Lightnin’ Hopkins is evident in the guitar work here, though Hopkins could never have negotiated some of the fancier riffs that Eaglin casually tosses off.

13. Who's Been Foolin' You*

Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup recorded this upbeat blues in 1944, and Eaglin's version retains the propulsive strumming that was a hallmark of all Crudup's best work. Born in central Mississippi in 1905 or 1909, Crudup didn't start playing guitar until he was about thirty, and his playing was always stronger on enthusiasm and drive than technique, but it provided very effective backing for his vocals and formed a template for another rudimentary but enthusiastic guitarist, Elvis Presley, who first hit with Crudup's "That's All Right." Crudup's hits were frequently covered by other blues artists in the 1940s and 1950s, and a couple, "Mean Old 'Frisco" and "Rock Me, Mamma," became enduring standards.

14. Drifting Blues*

The defining poles of the postwar blues mainstream were Louis Jordan's raucous horn combo and the smooth trio balladry of Charles Brown—another piano-playing Texan based in Los Angeles. "Drifting Blues," released in 1945, was the song that made Brown a star, and when Eaglin opens this version with a slide down the guitar strings, he is precisely mimicking the riff with which Johnny Moore, Brown's partner and leader of the Three Blazers, opened that recording. Building on the smooth vocal style Leroy Carr pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s, with an overlay of Nat "King" Cole, Brown gave blues a new polish and sophistication, and opened the door to artists like Ivory Joe Hunter, Amos Milburn, and Mercy Dee.

"Drifting Blues" quickly became a standard, recorded dozens of times in the 1940s and 1950s, but Eaglin cited the Three Blazers as his source, and his vocals show how thoroughly he had immersed himself in Brown's sinuous phrasing. On the take that was included on the original Folkways LP, it is this beautiful singing style that is most notable, but this previously unissued version shows how much more Eaglin had learned from the Blazers, and how far he could travel from even the most beloved model. His playing nods from the beginning to Moore's jazz-flavored chording, and as the song goes on, he takes it further and further into that territory. Comparing the guitar solo with any of the other slow blues performances on this CD, one might almost think it was a completely different guitarist:

the technique is similar, but the harmonic conception is from another planet, or at least a different part of town. When one considers that he seems to have recorded this performance at roughly the same time (possibly at the same session) as the other take, one is forced to confront the fact that virtually all the performances here are not "the way Eaglin played" a song, but just how he happened to feel like playing it at a moment that happened to be caught on tape.

15. Sophisticated Blues (Snooks Eaglin)

There is really nothing to be said about this performance, except that no one but Eaglin has—or could have—conceived of or executed a blues instrumental like this. And there is no reason to think he even considered it a composition; he was probably just improvising an upbeat boogie, and could have gone on creating new variations as long as he pleased.

16. Come Back, Baby*

Eaglin gave a Champion Jack Dupree recording as his source for this song—which makes sense, considering Dupree's influence on the Louisiana blues scene. Named "Champion" for his prowess as a boxer, Dupree turned to music in the 1930s, and in 1940 recorded the first example of what would become the basic New Orleans R&B piano style on "Junker's Blues," a drug song often known as "Junko Partner," which Fats Domino would famously rework into "The Fat Man." As for "Come Back Baby," it was written by the Mississippi-born pianist and singer Walter Davis, who made it into one of the biggest blues hits of the early 1940s. (When Lewis Jones, Alan Lomax, and John Work made their famous trip to the Mississippi Delta in 1941 and noted down the records available in Clarksdale's black cafés, this was the only one that appeared on every jukebox.) Though little remembered today, Davis was one of the most popular bluesmen of that period, and this song was covered by everyone from Sonny Terry to Ray Charles. Its appeal lies both in the sweet, plaintive lyric, and in a melody that is a distinctive departure from the standard blues form. The version included here is a different, though very similar, take from the one that appeared on Eaglin's Folkways LP.

17. Rock Island Line

The LP notes say that Eaglin learned this from Lead Belly's recording, which he had heard on a Nashville radio program, but more probably what he heard was Lonnie Donegan's "skiffle" version, which was a top-ten pop hit in 1956. If so, this is an excellent example of the circularity of popular music: Donegan was part of the English "trad" or New Orleans revivalist jazz scene, who named himself after the New Orleans singer-guitarist Lonnie Johnson and first recorded "Rock Island Line" on an album with trombonist Chris Barber titled *New Orleans Joys*. When Eaglin was busking in the French Quarter, this was exactly the sort of song that tourists would have asked to hear from a street guitarist, so it was natural that he should have assimilated it into his repertoire.

18. See See Rider

Eaglin said he learned this from a Lil Green recording, but since Green never recorded it, he was probably confusing her with Wee Bea Booze, who had a huge hit with it in 1943. (That was the first year in which *Billboard* magazine compiled its "Harlem Hit Parade," which became the "Rhythm and Blues" chart in 1949, and it listed Booze's record in the top ten for 22 weeks.) While the song reached back at least to the 1920s, when it was a big hit for Ma Rainey, a more immediate inspiration would have been Chuck Willis's version (spelled "C. C. Rider"), which had gone to number one in 1957; however, Eaglin's moody, introspective reading seems to owe little to any of these sources, and it is likely his own take on a song that was too familiar to have any single parent. The term *rider* for a lover was quite common in blues lyrics; its derivation requires no explanation.

19. One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer

Like "Let Me Go Home, Whiskey," this was part of Amos Milburn's drinking cycle, which for obvious reasons was very popular with barroom blues bands. Its composer, Rudolph Toombs, was a noted expert in this field, having penned the classic "One Mint Julep." As for Snooks himself, he has often told of the night when the Flamingos got so drunk that they had him drive the car home, figuring that even blind he was in better shape

than the rest of the band—an elegant testament to his sobriety. He made the trip with no problem, judging by feel when the car was easing onto the edge of the road. However, he has been known to take a taste on occasion.

20. Mean Old World

T-Bone Walker, the father of electric blues lead guitar and a defining singer of the West Coast school, first recorded this song in 1942. Eaglin may have heard Walker's version, but the one he plays here comes from the Chicago bluesman Little Walter, who had a top ten R&B hit with it in 1953. Like most New Orleans musicians, Eaglin seems to have had little interest in the Chicago players, but Little Walter was an exceptional artist. Though he was a mainstay of Muddy Waters's greatest band, Walter was fifteen years younger than Waters, and he was one of the great innovators of the 1950s blues scene. His harmonica lines, with their jazz-tinged phrasing and saxophone-like tone, revolutionized that instrument, and his vocals had a deep, soulful power that clearly captured Eaglin's ear.

21. Mean Old Frisco

This was Arthur Crudup's first hit, recorded in 1942, and while it can be traced back to an earlier tune, "Frisco Hi-Ball Blues" by the pianist Little Brother Montgomery, it was Crudup's record that made it one of the most-covered blues of all time. Eaglin is an infinitely more expert player than Crudup was, so it is interesting that he chooses to emulate the older guitarist's straight-ahead, rhythmic strumming. He adds a few of his own touches, but even on the break he never cuts loose with his usual single-string leads, and the result is one of most directly dance-flavored tracks on this album.

22. Every Day I Have the Blues

Eaglin learned this song from Lowell Fulson's 1950 recording, which put the song on the national blues map. It had first been cut two years earlier by its composer, Memphis Slim, as "Nobody Loves Me," and would go on to be a hit twice more within the next few years, for Joe Williams and B. B. King. Fulson, a guitarist from Oklahoma, was another of the

Southwesterners who moved to California and shaped the West Coast sound. An important influence on younger musicians, including Ray Charles (who briefly toured as his pianist) and B. B. King (who also covered his "Three O'clock Blues"), Fulson helped develop the lead guitar style that remains the dominant sound in electric blues, and added a gospel growl that would be imitated by hundreds of later singers.

23. Careless Love 2*

A comparison of this take with the previously-released version shows the extent to which Eaglin could improvise what sounds like a fully conceived arrangement. Both versions have complex accompaniments that seem to have been designed to fit the melody, and yet they are quite different. This one is so intricate and driving that it sometimes threatens to swamp the vocal—which may be why the other take was selected for the original LP. In purely guitaristic terms though, this is a prime Eaglin performance.

24. Drifting Blues 2

Even more than "Careless Love," this track provides a fascinating contrast to its alternate take. Here, Eaglin is putting his full attention on the vocal, without any of the jazz-guitar excursions that make the other version so fascinating. In the context of the full album, that makes this version less distinctive; but taken by itself, it is the more powerful performance—which is undoubtedly why it was the one included on the LP.

25. The Lonesome Road 2*

Kenneth Goldstein chose this song to end the original LP, for obvious reasons. In both its lyric and the phenomenal playing, it makes for an apt farewell. This alternate is not fundamentally different from the previously released take, but Eaglin was and is an indefatigable improviser, and the solos are a strong addition to his canon.

Elijah Wald is a musician and writer, whose books include *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*; *Josh White: Society Blues*; *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*; *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir* (with Dave Van Ronk); and *River of Song: A Musical Journey Down the Mississippi* (with John Junkerman). His website is www.elijahwald.com.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

A complete discography is available online at www.wirz.de/music/eaglin.htm

Harry Oster acoustic recordings:

Country Boy in New Orleans (Arhoolie)

That's All Right (Bluesville)

1960s recordings: *Imperial Recordings* (Capitol) (These are currently out of print, but are sure to reappear on one or another label, and are indispensable for any lover of New Orleans R&B)

1970s recordings: *The Best of Snooks Eaglin* (Grammercy) (A mix of electric and acoustic work, originally issued by the Sonet label, less satisfying, but with moments of brilliance. This material is set for reissue by Universal.)

1980s and beyond (These are the basic textbook of Snooks as he sounds in live performance, electric and untrammelled. The Black Top catalog has moved from owner to owner, and not all of these may be in print.):

Baby, You Can Get Your Gun! (Black Top, 1987)

Out of Nowhere (Black Top, 1989)

Teasin' You (Black Top, 1992)

Soul's Age (Black Top, 1995)

The Crescent City Collection (Varese, 2001) (A compilation from the Black Top material)

The Way It Is (Money Pit, 2002)

CREDITS

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|--|------|---------------------------------------|------|
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| 13. Who's Been Foolin' You* | 2:22 | | |

*previously unreleased

Folkways Records released New Orleans Street Singer in 1959 and the album set the world of folk and acoustic blues fans on fire. Snooks Eaglin was in the early stages of his long R&B career when folklorist Harry Oster heard him playing solo on the streets of the French Quarter. That very recording, presented here with 7 previously unreleased tracks, captured Eaglin's genius and elevated him to the pantheon of eccentric, uncategorizable guitar virtuosos. 32-page booklet, 25 classic tracks, 68 minutes of music.



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