

John Jackson

rappahannock blues



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Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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John Jackson Rappahannock Blues

1. **Rocks and Gravel 2:49** (John Jackson/Tradition Music, BMI)
2. **Too Tight Rag 4:00** (Blind Blake)
3. **Candy Man 2:44** (John Hurt/American League Music, BMI)
4. **Truckin' Little Baby 2:55** (Blind Boy Fuller)
5. **Railroad Bill 3:33**
6. **Nobody's Business (If I Do) 3:15**
7. **Don't You Want to Go Up There 2:25** (trad.; arr. John Jackson/Tradition Music, BMI)
8. **The Year Clayton Delaney Died 2:36** (Tom T. Hall/Unichappel Music, BMI)
9. **John Jackson's Breakdown 2:06** (John Jackson/Tradition Music, BMI)
10. **Red River Blues 2:56**
11. **Brown's Ferry Blues 2:11** (Alton and Rabon Delmore/Unichappel Music, BMI)
12. **Cindy 2:21** (trad.; arr. John Jackson/Tradition Music, BMI)
13. **You Ain't No Woman 2:22** (Bill Jackson/Testament Music, BMI)
14. **John Henry 3:20**
15. **Diddy Wah Diddy 3:12** (Blind Blake)
16. **Just a Closer Walk with Thee 2:33** (Kenneth Morris)
17. **Frankie and Johnny 3:40**
18. **Don't Let Your Deal Go Down 3:06** (trad.; arr. John Jackson/Tradition Music, BMI)
19. **Step It Up and Go 2:10** (Blind Boy Fuller; arr. John Jackson/Tradition Music, BMI)
20. **West Coast Rag 1:45** (Blind Blake)

Rappahannock Blues: John Jackson

Barry Lee Pearson

Blues artist, songster, and storyteller, John Jackson (February 25, 1924 – January 20, 2002) was the most important black Appalachian musician to come to broad public attention during the mid-1960s. The so-called Folk Revival of that decade witnessed the rediscovery of artists such as Mississippi John Hurt and Son House, who had recorded earlier and then disappeared into obscurity. After years in musical retirement such artists found themselves performing for avid new audiences. Although Jackson had no previous recording experience, he could play in the style of these earlier recording artists and knew their songs from long-lost 78 rpm recordings, and from family and friends. Moreover, he, too, was coming off a self-imposed twenty-year period of musical inactivity; no one beyond his family circle knew the extent of his skills—and even they did not imagine the interest his music would generate. Jackson recorded ninety songs during his first recording session. It was as if a musical time machine had been uncovered. The Washington-area folk song community had found its most able practitioner.

Equally important, Jackson drew attention to the rich musical traditions of Appalachia, one of America's most significant, though often overlooked, musical stories. Although black Appalachian music never received the attention given to the transition from Delta blues to Chicago blues, and to rock and roll, in the mountains a shared black and white string band tradition served as the basis for various forms of American roots music, ranging from bluegrass to regional rockabilly. Moreover, there was a southeastern blues tradition influenced by ragtime and old time string band music

that remained largely acoustic, and boasted such luminaries as Blind Blake and Blind Boy Fuller, Jackson's two most prominent influences.

Because he alternated blues with country, gospel, old time, and even rock, Jackson was referred to as a "songster." The term, which comes from black vernacular, refers to singer/instrumentalists with large repertoires. Among scholars it also denotes artists whose repertoires span the 19th and 20th centuries, including such Folkways luminaries as Lead Belly, Mississippi John Hurt, or Pink Anderson. From another perspective it designates blues singers who also know a wide range of non-blues songs, including spirituals, ballads, reels, or country dance songs, generally considered older than blues. Jackson was by no means the only artist who shared in this regional tradition, although he was one of the best. But he was also proud to be thought of as a "bluesman."

For the next thirty-plus years he was the Virginia/Washington, D.C. area's most prominent traditional artist, a festival favorite who reciprocated by throwing the best musical house parties in the region. Yet, coming from a generation that embraced hard work, he never thought of music as a job and always worked some form of day job, including as a gravedigger and cemetery caretaker. He respected his work and he respected the musicians from whom he learned, often downplaying his own skill in comparison to those artists whose names and music he carried on. His other passion was the discovery and collection of Civil War artifacts. Armed with his metal detector, he scoured nearby historical sites for relics. Some he donated to local historical societies, and other pieces he kept at his home, a veritable museum of Civil War lore.

John's father and mother, Suttie and Hattie Jackson, were tenant farmers. Typically, farm families needed to be large, and John was the seventh of fourteen children. As he recalled, they also tended to move around:

I was born in a little town of Woodville, Virginia, and my parents lived there about two years and then they moved from there over to Harlen, Virginia. I guess that was another, maybe five miles away; my father went to work for another farmer. Then they lived two years there, and then they moved from there up into Rappahannock County, the F.T. Valley. The F.T. Valley got its name after a big man came in there, called Francis Thorn[ton], and he owned all that land at one time. And that's where I grew up. I was about four years old when they moved there, and I was twenty-five years old when I left there and came to Fairfax, and have been in Fairfax ever since.

In the valley and surrounding mountains the rigor and rhythms of agricultural work were softened by music, and in the Jackson house music was a family affair to the extreme:

Everybody in the family played music—my mother, my father, aunts, uncles, my brothers and sisters. My father played; he played guitar, banjo, the mandolin, the ukulele. And he even had a six-string banjo, and these little pennywhistles he used to love. He used to play for parties and stuff all around the country. He was the onliest black man I know that went up in the white areas and played for some of the parties up there, around the mountains there. Everybody knew him, and he did play for some white parties there, I do know he did. He used to play for square dances. But he

played left-handed, so I could never learn from him. My mother blowed the harmonica and played the accordion, and, of course, she never sang no blues. She was mostly a spiritual singer. My oldest brother, Dick, he played, [and] my brother Jack. And I still have a brother up in the country who still plays autoharp and the guitar.

So what we did on the weekend and before bedtime at night, everybody sat around and sang songs. My aunt played guitar... her name was Aunt Etta. She married a fellow from down there just around Jefferson, and she used to play the guitar and sing with it. She was my father's sister. And then it was another lady named Miss Ruby Lee that used to sing and play the guitar. In fact, she even played some parts of the clawhammer banjo, because I can remember [them] playing "Little Brown Jug," and "Boil Them Cabbage Down," and stuff like that. They used to play "Leather Britches," [and] a song "Walk Down Ladies, Your Cake's All Gone"; you know, just old mountain hoedowns. That's what they call them back then. It's one song that they did, they say was from the slaves. I don't know if it's true. One I learned from my father: "I'm going up north, pull my britches off, and dance in my long shirttail."

Then it was one song that he used to do that we loved so much, about "Rooster Couldn't Roost Too High for Him," and it said "if it roost above the moon..." I don't know how it all meant. And another one he sang about "When the Cock-a-doodle Crow, It's Gonna Be Rain or Snow." And he used

to play “John Henry,” and “Railroad Bill,” “The Preacher and the Big Grizzly Bear,” “Coming Around the Mountain Charming Mary,” “I Wish I Was a Mole Rooting in the Ground,” and then “A Cool Drink of Water Before I Die.” I don’t know where he got that from.

John continued to play some of these songs he learned from his father, including the black ballads “John Henry” and “Railroad Bill.” But his real induction into the musicians’ fraternity came when his sister bought him a guitar:

My sister bought my first guitar for me. She paid \$3.75 for it, and she ordered it from Sears and Roebuck, or Montgomery Ward, or one of them other companies. And it was a little, small guitar. They ordered it and the mailman brought it, it came in the mail. And that’s how I got it. I played it around the house, and I used to carry it everywhere I went. I was nine years old when I got my first guitar.

A Jackson family legend tells of an encounter with another major inspiration who exposed the family to music from beyond the valley:

They were building the first blacktop road up through from Charlottesville, up through Rappahannock County. And they just had hundreds and hundreds of convicts with dynamite, mules, wheelbarrows, sledgehammers, and stuff like that, and they built a road; and this one particular convict used to tote water from my spring, we never did know his full name. Everybody called him “Happy,” and he was the happiest man you ever saw. He was

whistling, laughing, or singing all the time. And so I was kind of small, and he'd come get a bucket of water and I wondered why he made so much noise when he walked. So when I met him at the spring, I come to find out he had a little chain on his leg. And he got to talking to us, and he wondered what you all do around here, and I told him my father worked on the farm and played the guitar, banjo, mandolin, ukulele, and my mom played the harmonica and accordion. He said, "If you bring your daddy's guitar down here, I'll play you a song." So I would take the guitar to the spring and he'd play me a song, and then he'd go. In a little while he'd be back, and he'd do the same thing. It went on like that for three or four weeks. And so my mother heard him playing one day when she come down there, and she told him [when he got off work to come to dinner]. So we little ones went up on the hill where we could look right down at the camp, and he got off at six o'clock, and we walked him back to the house. And he eat dinner, and sat there and played for us until it was time to go back to the camp. Us little ones walked him back to the camp. And it got that way every night pretty near. He'd come over and play, and then he'd sit me on his knee and try to show me how to play some. Man, that man could play! And my father got so amazed at him, he wouldn't play with him. It was one spiritual he did that my mom used to sing with him. I can't remember what it was; I declare I don't. But anyway, he was around there for about a year and a half, or two years. I really got into it when I heard the convict play. He really had a lot of influence on me because I couldn't leave the guitar alone after hearing

him. I just kept right on along with it after that. "Happy." I never did know his real name.

Other musicians from the Deep South also brought their brand of blues into the Virginia mountains:

And we used to see people from out of Mississippi, use to be up in that area working. People like Tom Terrell; he was from Mississippi, [and] Ron Phillips. It was a big dog kennel and horse stable... about a mile and a half from where we lived. And they used to bring people from Mississippi breaking horses. It was, you know, a race horse farm, and they had the kennels that were for dogs and fox racing. And that's how we met them, the people from out of Mississippi who was blues players.

But along with these non-regional musicians, John was quick to advocate for the quantity and quality of local Virginia artists:

It was plenty bluesmen in Virginia around that area up there would have been just as good as Mississippi John Hurt or anybody else. The first slave settlements were in Virginia. There was a lot of good guitar pickers up in there—Charlie Bacon, Roosevelt Carter, Eddie Washington, [Slocum] Turner, Frank Turner, Izzy Washington, man, you name it. It was lots of them around there. But nobody could ever pick no guitar that come through there better than that convict could. I've never seen anything like it.

Although inspired by local musicians, he also learned from phonograph records. The family purchased a record player from two itinerant furniture dealers, and despite the family's poverty managed to slowly acquire a substantial collection of blues, gospel, and country recordings from traveling salesmen:

My older sister, who was doing washing and ironing for people and day work, would buy whatever records we was able to buy. And that's how we come by so many records. They'd leave us some that were either ten cents apiece or a quarter apiece. I don't know which. From the first time a record ever was made right up to the brand new ones. And they would buy two or three records every time he'd come. And he would go around just peddling these records, all around through the neighborhood. They would bring a bunch of records, and some come by mail order. It was people like the Carter Family, Old Jimmie Rodgers, Blind Blake, Lemon Jefferson, Frank Stokes; it was mostly black blues players from the South. And so that's how we come by so many records back then. It was just everybody whoever made a record near back to 1920s up to that time. I'd put a record on the record player and listen to it and then try to learn to play it. So that's the influences that I had when I grew up. You didn't know what they were, white people singing them or black people [or] who it were, there were no pictures on most of them. You could pick a voice out and pretty much tell who it was, but we never did know Uncle Dave Macon was a white man until way years later. Always thought he was black; everybody did around there.

That's the way I mostly learned to play was playing behind the 78 records. And what happened to those records? I had about five hundred 78 records; and the man that moved them broke up every one of them. And so when I got into the music, I still remembered all these blues tunes that I still had in my head when I quit playing in 1946.

Jackson's life changed dramatically in the 1940s. His father died in 1940, and he married Cora Lee Carter in 1944. In 1949, like many other rural African Americans, the Jacksons moved closer to the city of Washington, D.C., relocating to the then rural Virginia community of Fairfax Station. There he worked various jobs to make ends meet, and he and Cora built a house with their own hands. Starting his own family left less time for playing in public, and a fight at a party three years earlier led him to give up the house party circuit.

And I never went to any more dances. That was enough. I quit playing; I said to myself, "If I ever get out of here alive, I won't do this again," and I didn't. I put the guitar down and never played no more. That was in 1946, September 1946. I never touched the guitar no more until I met Chuck Perdue at the gas station in September or October 1964.

John's encounter with folklorist Chuck Perdue came about through a series of serendipitous circumstances. A local mailman, who was an aspiring musician, heard Jackson playing at home for a group of children and asked Jackson to teach him the tune he was playing. John met the new pupil at the mailman's second job at an Esso gas station. As the lesson began, Perdue stopped for gas and, being a guitar player himself, coaxed a song or

two from John; this began what would be a life-long friendship. Perdue, professor of folklore and English at the University of Virginia, was involved at the time with the Folklore Society of Greater Washington and the National Council for the Traditional Arts, and introduced Jackson to other blues and folk musicians in the region:

Now, he took me to meet Mississippi John Hurt, but I didn't play any then, just went and met him, Elizabeth Cotten, Skip James, and a whole bunch of other people. Two weeks later he took me to see Mance Lipscomb, Son House, and it was somebody else came in town, but I don't know who it was. And that's when they asked me to do two songs; and I played about half of a song and this man jumped up and said, "I want to make a record by that man." It was Chris Strachwitz [from] Arhoolie Record Company. They claim I did ninety songs when I did that first one. Back in 1965 and 1967 when they did the first two albums. Yeah, I did ninety songs. I started playing at eleven o'clock in the morning and played until eleven o'clock that night.

Although Jackson recalled a thriving blues guitar tradition in his home community, few black Virginians were recorded. During the 1920s and 1930s only three musicians produced a significant body of recordings. William Moore, a barber from Tappahannock, recorded for Paramount in 1928. Half of his eight issued songs were ragtime or country dance instrumentals reflective of the pre-blues string band tradition. Lynchburg's Luke Jordan also recorded a number of sides for Victor in 1928 and 1929. Carl Martin, a native Virginian, moved out of the state as a youngster, but his 1930 recordings show his Appalachian roots. Stephen Tarter and Harry Gay made a single recording for Victor in



Jackson on the festival circuit in 1970, with Michael Cooney, left, and John Cephas.

1928, harmonica player Blues Birdhead cut several sides for Okeh in 1929, and several inmates including Jimmie Strother were recorded by John A. Lomax and Harold Spivacke at the State Farm in Lynn, Virginia, in 1936.

During the 1940s and 1950s Alec Seward of Newport News made some records in New York City; Silas Pendleton from Rappahannock, Virginia, was field-recorded by folklorist Horace Beck; and John Tinsley of Franklin County made a single recording. Spurred by the Folk Revival of the 1960s, other artists with Virginia ties were located, including Richmond-born songster Bill Williams, a brilliant guitarist who claimed he had toured with Blind Blake. Pete Lowry recorded Pernell Charity of Sussex County, and Kip Lornell recorded a number of musicians for the Blue Ridge Institute, most notably the Foddrell family. Franklin County's Archie Edwards recorded several fine CDs in 1991 and 2001. Only John Cephas, from Bowling Green, Virginia, recorded as extensively as Jackson.

Besides recording John also began touring on the folk and blues revival circuit:

And from then on they used to drive me to Newport to the festival there; the Philadelphia Festival, and one time they brought me clean into Chicago; Atlanta, Georgia, you know, different places. And that's how I got around; and I would play some at each and every one of them. I met Lightnin' Hopkins and Roosevelt Sykes, just about everybody, you know, at one time or another over the years. I didn't go to Europe until 1969. And I had made two records for Arhoolie. In 1969 Chris took me on tour around Europe, and we went to pretty near every little country over there. And then he asked me to do a recording in Stuttgart, Germany. That was in 1969, and that was my first tour there. I can remember everybody that was on the tour; it was myself, Earl Hooker, Magic Sam, and Clifton and Cleveland Chenier with his band out of Louisiana, and whistling Alec Moore, who was a blues piano player. That's who was on that tour. Magic Sam was very nice; I liked Magic Sam. He was very cool. But Earl Hooker was very sick on that tour, and they both died later on that year.

He also toured in Asia for the State Department, teaming with country rather than blues artists:

That was in 1984. We went on tour around the world; it was a great tour. Ricky Skaggs was on that; and Buck White and the Down Home Folk; Jerry Douglas and myself.

Two years later he was designated a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts for his role as a teacher and traditional artist. A quietly confident heritage caretaker, he carried on the family traditions, bringing his version of American roots music to a worldwide audience.

In 1999 his wife Cora died, and three of his sons preceded him in death. Through it all he continued to work, performing his last show on New Year's Eve 2002, just twenty days before he died. Shortly before his death, he spoke of how he wanted to be remembered:

I think I've been discovered as a bluesman, [but] I'm more of a songster than a bluesman, because I play music other than blues. But I would like to be remembered the same as Josh White, or Blind Boy Fuller, or Blind Blake. I really would like to be. Of course, I don't say I'm as great a blues player as Blind Blake or Blind Boy Fuller and those people, but I would like to be remembered that way.

This CD has been guided by his request, and features Jackson's take on Josh White, Blind Boy Fuller, and Blind Blake's complex blues stylings. But it also shows his songster dimension, with spirituals, ballads, reels, rags, and other country songs once popular at black dances in the mountains of Virginia.

Note *All quotes come from personal interviews with the author conducted over a thirty-year period.*



Thoughts on John Jackson

Jeff Place

We who live in the Washington area were a spoiled bunch for many years: we had a player of John Jackson's caliber living right here in our own backyard. John was one of the warmest and most kindhearted men I've ever met. He possessed this honey-dripped, warm Rappahannock County accent in which no single syllable could not be stretched into two or three. His infectious good spirit came out in his stage performances. Even if he was having a bad day, you would never know it.

I first met John in the mid-1980s after my old colleague at the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture, Gerry Parsons, asked if I would make a tape of music—and I don't remember which artist it was—from my record collection to give to John's son, who was hospitalized with ill health caused by Agent Orange he was exposed to in Vietnam (he subsequently died from the problem). When I met John, Gerry said that I was the guy who made the tape, and John was very thankful. I would run into him every few years and he always remembered me, but I wouldn't be surprised if he did that with everyone.

In my over twenty years running the Smithsonian Folklife Archives, this is a compilation I have always wanted to do. It has amazed me that, whereas some blues musicians have dozens of record releases, one of the best players in my opinion, John, should have only a handful. He made three for Arhoolie in the 1960s, two Rounder LPs in the 1970s and 1980s, and one later release on Alligator.

This album is drawn from the many John Jackson recordings that exist in the Smithsonian Archives. John appeared at more Smithsonian Folklife Festivals than any

other artist (16). He was our great pinch-hitter. If someone couldn't play or didn't show, we could always call John, who lived in Fairfax Station, Virginia, to come on down and fill in. At each Festival John played 10–20 times, sometimes alone but for many years with his son James. He appeared in concerts and in workshops with other songsters, blues singers, and even bluegrass musicians.

Two performances here come from two nights of concerts we sponsored along with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and other organizations at the Barns of Wolf Trap in October 1997. These concerts were a tribute to the CD reissue of Harry Smith's classic *Anthology of American Folk Music*. We purposely tried to find modern musicians who carried on the traditions that were presented on the *Anthology*. Who better to represent artists like John Hurt or Julius Collins than John Jackson? A Smithsonian Folkways CD called the *The Harry Smith Connection* (SFW 40085) was released from these shows.

There are many great performances among these Festival tapes, but a large number are marred by airplanes flying over, buses idling near the stage, sound bleed from other stages, and even one year a horse race running by. Barry Lee Pearson and I listened to hundreds of these on-stage songs and found the best examples. There are still occasional odd noise problems in some, but we hope the songs capture John's talent and spirit.

For those who are discovering John for the first time, welcome to what has been for too long too much of a secret.



The Songs

Barry Lee Pearson

John Jackson's incredible repertoire of songs comes from various sources. First, there are those he learned from his father, family, church, and other local musicians. Second, there are those he picked up from old 78 rpm records from the late 1920s through the 1930s and early 1940s that had been accumulated by his family. These blues, rags, hillbilly, and gospel songs formed the greatest portion of his repertoire, and he had committed them to memory before the records were broken during a 1940s moving accident. Third, there are Jackson's own compositions and re-workings of traditional songs. Fourth, there are the country songs he picked up via radio, and, finally, the material he learned from other musicians he worked with and records he heard following his "discovery" in 1964.

His repertoire of recorded songs remained fairly consistent from the beginning, and most of the songs on this CD were also recorded and released by Chris Strachwitz in the mid-1960s. They comprise a treasure trove of American roots music, blues, rags, ballads, spirituals, and country songs, particularly those which were part of a shared string band tradition drawn from by both black and white musicians. The majority of songs are in standard tunings with the exception of "John Henry," which is played in an open-tuning knife style. All are played with guitar accompaniment except "Cindy," which is played on banjo. John works alone apart from "Step It Up and Go," where his son, James, accompanies him. The listener may also notice a tendency to speed up the tempo on various songs; two of Jackson's heroes, Blake and Fuller, also played this way.

1. Rocks and Gravel

(Recorded June 29, 1975; from archive reel FP-1975-RR-0479)

This is one of the blues John learned from neighboring musicians in the F.T. Valley. According to Chuck Perdue, John learned it from Roosevelt Carter, who may have picked it up in prison or on a road gang. According to Jackson, Carter was one of the premier local musicians, “a good guitar picker who had a seven-string guitar and could play slide style.” Atlanta bluesman Peg Leg Howell recorded a “Rock and Gravel Blues” for Columbia in April 1928, as well as several other blues relating to prison themes. While the line “It takes rocks and gravel to make a solid road” can be read literally, it is also traditional in a metaphorical sense as a blues proverb.

2. Too Tight Rag

(Recorded June 24, 1981; from archive reel FP-1981-RR-0059)

This song comes from Blind Blake’s 1929 Paramount recording “Too Tight Blues No. 2.” Blake was born Arthur Phelps sometime between 1890 and 1895 in Jacksonville, Florida. The circumstances surrounding his death remain unexplained, but he is thought to have died in the mid-1930s. Blake was an enigmatic guitarist and vocalist who relocated from the Southeast to Chicago in the 1920s, and recorded ninety-plus songs for Paramount from 1926 to 1932. Although he is considered one of the first male stars of blues recording as well as one of the greatest—if not the greatest—guitar virtuosos of his day, he remains an obscure figure, little known beyond his recordings and a single photograph. He is rumored to have traveled through Virginia, and he unquestionably had a major impact on both black and white Virginia guitarists, paralleled only by Blind Boy Fuller’s. Jackson, for example, played eight or nine Blake pieces

and said of the man, “It’s nobody had the techniques that man had. Of course, all of them was good, but he had techniques with his string and knew licks that I never heard in no other records.”

3. Candy Man

(Recorded July 2, 1970; from archive reel FP-1970-7RR-0040)

This version comes from Mississippi John Hurt’s 1928 Okeh recording “Candy Man Blues.” Not to be confused with the Gary Davis song with the same title, this song became a standard during the Folk Revival and was one of Jackson’s most requested songs. A slyly sexual double entendre, at least when Hurt performed it, Jackson would preface his version with a disclaimer as to how he changed Hurt’s verses. Whether he learned it from Hurt’s recording or from Hurt himself, who spent a number of years in Washington, D.C., in the 1960s, is unclear.

4. Truckin’ Little Baby

(Recorded July 4, 1972; from archive reel FP-1972-7RR-0086)

This is John’s version of Blind Boy Fuller’s 1938 Columbia recording “She’s a Truckin’ Little Baby.” Fuller, born Fulton Allen, was from North Carolina and was by far the Piedmont region’s most prolific and most influential artist. Although he only recorded from 1935 to his death in 1941, he cut 135 titles, including several versions of his hit “Truckin’ My Blues Away.” “Truckin’” was a popular dance of the time. Jackson recorded over a half-dozen Fuller pieces.

5. Railroad Bill

(Recorded October 25, 1997, at the Barns of Wolf Trap)

“Railroad Bill” is a blues ballad based on the exploits of an Alabama turpentine camp worker named Morris Slater who earned his nickname by breaking into box-cars and stealing goods from freight trains. His legend grew as he eluded the law and killed a Sheriff McMillan in 1895. In 1897,

he was ambushed at a country store and shot to pieces in the manner of Dillinger or Bonnie and Clyde. According to legend he also had supernatural conjuring powers, and some folks believed he was never killed. John learned the ballad from his father, who also told him stories about the outlaw. The song gained great popularity during the Folk Revival, primarily as an instrumental in the key of C, the same key in which John plays it. The song was recorded at a 1997 tribute concert honoring Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

6. Nobody's Business (If I Do)

(Recorded July 4, 1972; from archive reel FP-1972-7RR-0086)

This song seems to have led a double life as a black folk song and a staple of the vaudeville blues stage tradition. A version attributed to writers Porter Grainger and E. Robbins was popularized by Bessie Smith, but other women—Sara Martin, Lena Wilson, Alberta Hunter, and Georgia

White—also recorded it. This version may be loosely based on an early song collected in the field by Howard Odum and later recorded by Frank Stokes, a Memphis street singer. In 1928, five years after Bessie Smith, he recorded “Taint Nobody’s Business If I Do (Part 1 and 2)” for Victor. Mississippi John Hurt also had a version titled “Nobody’s Dirty Business.” Jackson’s version is related to Frank Stokes’ version.

7. Don’t You Want to Go Up There

(Also known as “In My Father’s House”; recorded July 2, 1970; from archive reel FP-1970-7RR-0040)

This is an old African American spiritual called “In My Father’s House.” Carl Sandburg published a version in 1927 in his classic book, *The American Songbag*, that was collected from black singers in Fort Worth, Texas. John’s version is similar to the Carter Family’s version, which they called “There’ll Be Joy, Joy, Joy,” and it is possible that their version is the one John heard.

8. The Year Clayton Delaney Died

(Recorded October 5, 1977; from archive reel FP-1977-RR-0005)

Written by Kentucky singer and songwriter Tom T. Hall, this semi-autobiographical song is based on Hall's relation with an older musician, Clayton Delaney. The song was a country hit on Mercury in 1971; John Jackson heard it on the radio and added it to his repertoire. It is a relatively rare example of Jackson picking up a contemporary song later in his life, and it illustrates his affection for both country music and storytelling songs.

9. John Jackson's Breakdown

(Recorded June 29, 1975; from archive reel FP-1975-RR-0479)

Sometimes titled "John Jackson's Stomp" or "Rag in C," this original instrumental is typical of the Piedmont and Appalachian guitar ragtime tradition. It could be used as a fast dance piece, but was more likely a solo display vehicle offering the guitarist a chance to show out in a possibly competi-

tive setting. John tells a story about a guitar competition in which the loser broke his guitar over a rock, never to play again. Such cutting contests could be serious affairs.

10. Red River Blues

(Recorded June 29, 1975; from archive reel FP-1975-RR-0479)

Southeastern blues players know this blues by various names—"Blood Red River," "Red River Blues," and "Bye Bye Baby." Songs employing the eight-bar format were quite popular in the region. The song is traditional, but John's version most likely stems from Josh White's 1933 Banner recording "Blood Red River." Blind Boy Fuller's take, titled "Bye Bye Baby," accompanied by Sonny Terry, was cut for Okeh in June 1940. The song has such an anthemic quality in the Southeast that the most extensive musical survey of the region by Bruce Bastin is titled *Red River Blues*.

11. Brown's Ferry Blues

(Recorded September 5, 1976; from archive reel FP-1976-RR-2794)

This piece, written by Alton Delmore, is associated with the guitar-playing Alabama duet, Alton and Rabon Delmore, better known simply as the Delmore Brothers. They recorded it for Victor on its Bluebird label in 1933, but also performed it on the Grand Old Opry. The brothers' combination of slick guitar work and black-sounding material made them popular among mountain musicians like Jackson, illustrating once again the mixed racial quality of Jackson's songs, and the shared traditions of mountain musicians.

12. Cindy

(Recorded September 5, 1976; from archive reel FP-1976-RR-2793)

John learned banjo as a youngster after his first guitar was broken:

I used to go up to my Aunt Nellie's house, and Jim Clark kept a banjo setting up in

the chimney corner, and I used to pick it up and fool around with it. And that's how I learned to play what banjo I play. I never knew I could play no banjo, but people tell me I can play. It was a lot of banjo players around there; French Tyme was one of the best, and Jim Clark, my Aunt Nellie's husband...yeah, them two could really go. Jim Clark was the first man I seen that picked the banjo with three fingers and a thumb. Now where he learned that from, I don't know. But he wouldn't play for nobody. He played only for his own amusement.

"Cindy" is a reel or country dance song. Other banjo players from Uncle Dave Macon to Pete Seeger do their versions, which generally consist of humorous, even irreverent traditional verses. The term "reel" is European in origin, but in black vernacular it essentially meant any secular song. Early blues, for example, were initially referred to as reels by the older generation.

13. You Ain't No Woman

(Recorded 1976; from archive reel FP-1976-RR-2806)

John learned this from fellow songster Bill Jackson, with whom he shared a Festival of American Folklife stage in 1969. No relation, Bill Jackson was born in Granite, Maryland, in 1906 but moved to Philadelphia. Pete Welding recorded Bill Jackson for Testament Records in 1962. (See: Bill Jackson, *Long Steel Rail Blues*, Testament TCD 5014, 1994.)

14. John Henry

(Recorded October 25, 1997, at the Barns of Wolf Trap)

Probably America's best-known African American ballad, "John Henry" tells the story of a black railroad worker who engages a new steam drill machine in a contest to see which can tunnel furthest into a mountain. John Henry wins, possibly saving the jobs of his fellow workers—but, as in most ballads, dies in the process. At least that's how the legend goes. The song exists in a

remarkable array of forms—as a work song with protest lyrics; as a tribute extolling the virtues of an occupational hero; even as a dance song. Similar to the white ballad tradition, "John Henry" is romanticized, and with few exceptions the lyrics lack the blues irony typical of urban African American ballads. It may be based on a historical event, as are most black ballads, and it has been tied to two competing localities. Most East Coast versions connect it to Talcott, West Virginia, site of the Big Bend Tunnel and the C&O Railroad. People there celebrate "John Henry Day" and have erected a statue of the legendary black worker on top of the mountain through which the Big Bend Tunnel runs. More recent research, however, locates the song's source at Leeds, Alabama, circa 1885. Jackson learned the piece from his father, and plays it cross key or in open tuning, using a slide to play the melody. "John Henry" was commonly played in this fashion, representing a transition from banjo tunings to open-tuned guitars, which were either tuned to G or Spanish, as is the banjo; or to open D, usually termed Sebastopol.

15. Diddy Wah Diddy

(Recorded September 5, 1976; from archive reel FP-1976-RR-2793)

Blind Blake recorded “Diddy Wah Diddy” for Paramount in 1929; the flip side was “Police Dog Blues,” which Jackson also performed regularly. It did well enough that Blake recorded a “Diddy Wah Diddy No. 2” the next year. This good-time double-entendre blues employs a folk term for its title and subject that has multiple meanings. For Zora Neale Hurston, like Blake a Floridian, it represented a mythical town. Rock and roll pioneer Bo Diddley’s 1955 Checker release, “Diddy Wah Diddy,” also used the term as a place name.

16. Just a Closer Walk with Thee

(Recorded June 29, 1975; from archive reel FP-1975-RR-0479)

Gospel composer Kenneth Morris published this gospel classic in 1940. Supposedly, it is based on a song he overheard a train station porter singing. It went on to become one of the most popular and

widely recorded gospel songs of all time. It also represents the process by which a traditional song becomes a popular song, then reenters the folk tradition.

17. Frankie and Johnny

(Recorded September 5, 1976; from archive reel FP-1976-RR-2793)

“Frankie and Johnny,” also known as “Frankie and Albert [or Allen]” or just “Frankie,” is a St. Louis ballad based on an actual event centered in black urban street life. One Sunday night in October 1899, prostitute Frankie Baker shot Albert Britt during a late-night altercation. She stood trial but was acquitted as her act was judged self-defense. The song became quite a hit and over the years, and under numerous titles, has been recorded by Charley Patton, Lead Belly, John Hurt, Coley Jones, Bessie Smith, Charlie Poole, and Johnny Cash. It has also been field-collected countless times, has been the subject of a dissertation, and was turned into a play and an Elvis Presley film. John’s version

contains numerous traditional verses, but deviates in the judge's sentence.

18. Don't Let Your Deal Go Down

(Recorded August 14, 1976; from archive reel FP-1976-RR-2653)

Charlie Poole recorded a “Don't Let Your Deal Go Down Blues” for Columbia in 1925. Poole's biographer, Kinney Rorrer, places it in black tradition as early as 1911. It was widely recorded by country artists from Vernon Dalhart to Riley Puckett, and later became a bluegrass standard. John learned it from his father, and claimed it was one of the first ragtime songs he ever learned.

19. Step It Up and Go

(Recorded June 25, 1981; from archive reel FP-1981-RR-0063)

The immediate predecessor for this upbeat Piedmont classic was Blind Boy Fuller's March 1940 Vocalion hit. However, as with so many traditional songs, Fuller's piece has little claim to originality. Fuller's

manager, J.B. Long, claimed that he, not Fuller, wrote it, “inspired” by a Memphis street musician who sang a song about “Touch It Up and Go”; the Memphis Jug Band had recorded a “Bottle It Up and Go” for Okeh in 1934; and Delta stalwart Tommy McClennan had a medium hit with his own “Bottle It Up and Go” for Bluebird in 1939. Okeh-Vocalion recorded another “Step It Up and Go” by Black Cats and the Kitten in October 1940; Brownie McGhee tried it in August 1940, unissued, and again in May 1941 following Fuller's death as “Step It Up and Go #2” by Blind Boy Fuller #2. Finally, Fuller's former partner, Sonny Terry, cut it as “Touch It Up and Go” in October 1941, but it was never released. This version is a duet with John's son, James, on second guitar.

20. West Coast Rag

(Recorded August 14, 1976; from archive reel FP-1976-RR-2653)

Blind Blake recorded this song as “West Coast Blues” for Paramount in 1926—his first recording—and again in 1927. Blake,

along with Blind Lemon Jefferson, was one of the first male guitar-playing blues artists to make a name for himself. Stylistically, he was an East Coast artist, although he spent much of his life as a Chicago studio session man. Nevertheless, his challenging guitar work earned him the admiration of both black and white guitar players in Virginia. Jackson's version comes from one of the old 78 records his family bought. Although it was recorded only two years after Jackson was born, it remained in circulation long enough for him to learn it.

OTHER SUGGESTED LISTENING BY JOHN JACKSON

Blues and Country Dance Tunes from Virginia,
Arhoolie 1025, 1966

Country Blues and Ditties, Arhoolie 471, 1999
(compilation of other Arhoolie albums)

Deep in the Bottom, Rounder 2032, 1983

Don't Let Your Deal Go Down, Arhoolie 378, 1992
(compilation of other Arhoolie albums)

Front Porch Blues, Alligator 4867, 1999

John Jackson in Europe, Arhoolie 1047, 1969

*John Jackson, Vol. 2: More Blues and Country Dance
Tunes from Virginia*, Arhoolie 1035, 1968

Step It Up and Go, Rounder 2019, 1978

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