Sonny Terry Harmonica & Vocal Solos

Alcoholic Blues | Women's Blues (Corina) | Lost John | Locomotive Blue | Bad Luck Blues
Harmonica Stomp | Shortnin' Bread | Fine and False Voice | Beautiful City
FOLKWAYS RECORDS FTS 32035
(was FA 2035)

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Notes by Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE CORP., N.Y.
A piney dog, a stubby old scrub oak, and a few patches of dew, drizzly mosses hardly add up to much in any history of stagecraft, but when they brought out a "pretty little girl with a red dress on," the way it says in the old song, then mixed in the skirling of a bewitched harmonica and a whooping shell that sounded like a fox galloping over the footlights, when the red dress started to swirl, the scrubby brush moved with it; the harmonica sang out its plaintive backwoods chant, and Broadway and the rest of the jangling world out there a few hundred feet to the left, flicked out like a window when the shade is drawn.

It was so real yet so unobtrusive that few persons, if any, looked down later at the small type on the "FINIAN'S RAINBOW" program to see what made it so good. Jo Mielziner, with his name up front somewhere in pretty big letters, had done the stage business; it was Michael Kidd's choreography, it was Anita Alvearez's dance, and it was Sonny Terry and Shoppin', Hollerin', and Harmonica.

It would be a long shot from "FINIAN'S RAINBOW" January, 1947, to Carnegie Hall, December 1950, but one or two persons in the audience made it for that other place and other date had marked San Francisco Sonny Terry's first appearance on any New York stage. Even then, back before the surdew, swamp lights, and navy branches of the later stage production, Sonny Terry's music had set the country going, that was at a concert titled "Spirituals to Swing." When everything from Sidney Bechet, Mitchell's Christian Singers, the Boogie Woogie Trio of Alton Amonk, Meade Lux Lewis, and Pete Johnson, to the rocking of Count Basie Orchestra of that year, had been heard in a sort of omnibus of swing, in that fast, bright vehicle, anything as simple as a harmonica and a rough, high-pitched song from the country, could have been lost, but Sonny Terry got his message across in a way that seemed almost uncanny, the plain harmonica, the cupped, lyrating hand that engineered the swell and fall of its reedy song, and the minuets of his voice in falsettos, held the big music hall silent, to that silence, Sonny Terry gave the low, faraway whistle of the lonesome train, the baying of hounds loping hard up against the scent, and the deep-woods cry of a lost soul. The city people learned something strange and new about the country, his country.

The way Sonny tells it, none of this might have ever happened. He was born just about twenty miles north-northeast of Durham, North Carolina. It is a land rich in folkways, but also hustling and bustling with corn, cotton, and tobacco. In it are contrasted the old ways, the beliefs in conjury and witchcraft, and the new radio, television, gas and diesel engines, the tobacco-processing industry of Durham, a high, mile-drawn cart loaded with tobacco leaf done up in sheaves parks alongside a low-slung truck trailer at the auctions, and a juke can take turns with a crappie old fiddle at a crossroads store on a Saturday night, but with old or new, one thing stays true — there must be music.

Sonny's father reared was a free man, with land and a house of his own. It was pretty hilly, in the Piedmont. He raised "bacco, what you smoke, and corn, cotton, chicken — 'bout twenty, twenty-five acres. He used to work for 't himself, nobody to bother 'im. There were three brothers, besides Sonny — Willie, Ronald, and "Abury" (pronounced "Azayey") — and 'one sister livin', two sisters dead."

He don't know much about his mother and father before his time, and he knows nothing of his parents, except that he heard his grandmother talk about their life as slaves. Sonny lost his father twenty-two years ago, and his mother eight years after that. He does remember, though, the story of how they met and were married. It was in the back country, near Greensboro, Georgia. "I used to hear him talk 'bout when he used to go see my mother, an' her father used to set at him, you know, and he used to run. He would slip in there, her father set at him with a stick or something — chanced him away. There was two girls — my mother an' her sister. Well, he stay he stole her. When the ole man was done one day, he just went there — took out and they slipped out, an' married. I think she was fourteen, an' he was twenty."

They moved to the farm near Durham, and Sonny Terry was born October 24, 1911. It was a simple life, the one-story house had four rooms, a front and back porch, there was a well in the backyard, everyone old enough to scratch dirt or hold a hoe worked, and worked hard — in the fields, or on the place, they had a big mule, a hog, and a smokehouse. Every year, the terrys laid away for winter — peaches, apples, pears, the man was so good, you could smell it for 'bout two miles. There was "fresh" cabbage, collard greens, i'm' ballet. They also made 'home brew,' i'm' stuff like that — an' cider.

The corn liquor came from the woods. "It was pretty cheap. I know you used to get a pint for fifty cents — and you could get a whole jarful for 'bout half a dollar. Yeah, we used to drink it when we were little. Father used to keep it and slip it off, they wouldn't drink mud — but we kids, we used to slip it in there sometimes. Sometimes he come home, catch us drunk. I'd be sleepy, you know.

There are lots of holidays in North Carolina, and when they come, the folk go off hunting. There were three or four hound dogs, around the place, and they jumped the rabbits. My father started me toin' a gun, when I was 'bout ten, a shotgun. You could keep a pistol in your house, but you couldn't tote it out. We shot crow, ducks, buzzards, an' everything."

Sonny went to school at 9:15, but he can re-collect only two things about it. "I learned my ABC's, and the teacher was pretty mean. She loved to whip you all the time. I was pretty mean myself, too — I run around fightin' with
THE BOYS, I REMEMBER, ONCE WE AN'T A BOY GOT INTO IT, YOU KNOW, BACK THEN, YOU CARRY YOUR DINNER TO SCHOOL. ONE OF THE BOYS, HE USED TO COME TO SCHOOL ALL THE TIME, HE WOULD NEVER BRING NO DINNER, AN' HE BLEW MINE AN' EAT IT UP, SO WHEN THEY COME OUT OF SCHOOL, I WHELPED HIM. THEN THE TEACHER WHELPED ME, HE WAS TWO YEARS OLDER, BUT I WAS A LITTLE STOUTER, AN' I THINK HE OFTEN WOULDN'T EAT MUCH, AN' I WAS A LITTLE WEAK.

AFTER SCHOOL, ON DAYS WHEN THERE WAS NO WORK FOR THE CHILDREN, THEY RAN OFF TO THE OTHER CABINS, AND PLAYED TILL NIGHT TIME. BONNY CLIMBED PERSEPOLIS TREE, JUMPED OUT, PITCHED HORSESHOES, AND SHOT MARBLES. LATER AT NIGHT, THE YOUNG BOYS GANZED TOGETHER TO GO THROW STONES AT THE GIRLS' WINDOWS, THAT WOULD BRING THEM UP AGAINST CURFEW, AND IRATE PARENTS. YOU KNOW, AT NINE O'CLOCK IN THOSE OLD TOWNS, THEY COME THERE AN' MAKE YOU GO HOME, WE'D GO AN' KNOCK THE LITON LIGHTS OUT, HE'D RUN OUT, SAY HE WANTED TO SHOOT US, BUT HE COULDN'T FIND US, WE WERE OUT IN THE DARK SOMEWHERE. HE'D TELL OUR FAMILIES 'BOUT IT.

PROBABLY THE FIRST MUSIC BONNY TERRY EVER HEARD WAS HIS FATHER PLAYING THE HARMONICA, AND HIS MOTHER SINGING. HIS FATHER ALSO PLAYED THE GUITAR NOW SOLED AS A 'BRUCE HARP': 'WHAT YOU HIT WITH YOUR FINGER, HE PLAYED SHOR'rIN' BREATH, AN' CAY' JONES, AN' PIECES LIKE THAT. HE USED TO COME IN FROM WORK, PUT HIS HARP DOWN, AN' I'D GRAB THE THING, AN' MESS WITH IT, AN' HE WOULD COME IN, AN' HE WOULD PLAY AN HOUR, YOU KNOW.'

BUT THE HARMONICA WAS THE INSTRUMENT BONNY REALLY LOVED. 'I BEEN KINDA PLAYIN' HARMONICA EVER SINCE I VA BIG ENOUGH TO KNOW WHAT ONE WAS — I RECKON 'BOUT FIVE, SIX YEARS — I PLAYED LIKE A KID PLAYS, COULDN'T PLAY NO TUNE. LOST JOHN, THAT'S THE FIRST ONE I LEARNED. I JUST LEARNED A LITTLE FROM HIM, FROM THE HARP-ON-UP, JUST TUK IT UP MYSELF, HE COULD TAKE THE HARMONICA AN' 'MUBBE, IN HIS MOUTH, AN' WOULD PUT HIS HAND ON IT, AND WOULD PLAY 'BOUT LIKE I PLAY NOW. 'BOUT PUTTIN' HIS HAND ON IT, HE NEVER DID USE HIS HAND ON THE HARMONICA LIKE I DID. I THINK HE JUST LEARNED IT, YOU KNOW, LITTLE PLANTATION SHOW USED TO COME THROUGH, MAYBE HE CAUGHT IT FROM SOMETHIN' LIKE THAT, HAD 'EM TENTS OUT THERE IN THE EVENING, POSSIBLY HE HEARD MUSIC.'

Perhaps the story of "LOST JOHN" goes back to a BIBLE TALE, although it would be a weighty job to prove it. It is true that many Bible tales have worked themselves into religious song of both Negro and white folk of this region. Stories of Noah and the Ark, Jonah and the Whale, have been taken down in Spirituals sung both in Durham, North Carolina, and Georgia, not far from Boney's birthplace, and John, Evidently a Composite of the Apostle John and John the Baptist, crops up in "Oh, We'll Put John On the Island," a Song heard in Eastern North Carolina, near the Outer Banks, (Newman's White, American Negro folk songs, Harvard University Press. 35)

Boney Terry remembers it this way: "This ole fellow used to come down to our house, tell us 'Bout Lost John. Lost John, he... you know, there's words to that... but I don't know it. He used to come round, he talkin' 'Bout Lost John. Oh, he's pretty old... I was about twenty-five, he was 'bout fifty, or bothin', then. I reckon he's dead, now, long of them. But he gone out in the country, he used to come over, sit me to play for him all the time, an' he tell me that he know the original of that Lost John, he say Lost John was the reason the fellow got lost in the woods, an' he couldn't find his way out, an' he wanted to play, an' he had this little harmonica part, an' people heard him, an' they went a-hollerin' back at him, 'cause they didn't know what it tell him, an' got him out of the woods, so they asked him what his name, said his name was Lost John.

On Sundays, Boney and his family used to go to church — to the "Hester Grove Baptist Church, out in the country." Boney attended Sunday School, and sang in the Quartet. "I was the baritone, an' one of the boys done baritone, an' one the lead. They sang that one I recorded for Folkways, Beautiful City, I never put different verses in it, we sung most like based on somethin' most like you hear sung in church.

When the services began, the preacher got up, "The preacher preaches, the others join in. Yeah, shoutin' an' jumpin' over benches an' fallin', an'... he could preach and they sing, an' they have a quartet come up an' sing, like we used to do. That's the really religious songs. One they used to sing 'Bout you can't hide even if you tried, God got your number he know where you live an' death got a warrant for you. ... (My father) used to sing church songs, Lemme bee, he sang that song 'Bout you better mind what you talkin' 'Bout... used to play that on the harmonica too.'"

Little Boney Terry heard church songs in the streets, too. In the days when he was growing up, back then, there were preachers who came around, singing, and selling broadsides: "I been religious songs, Christian songs, like that, church songs, he had a song what he sing, 'Bout it's a hand writin' on the wall. 'Bout come here an' read it, see what it says, it's the hand writin' on the wall."

A little to one side, but not, as they say, it, conflicting with the deeply religious part of the lives of Boney Terry and his family, was the FUNK. On Saturday nights, Boney Terry took his harmonica and went out to play for dances. 'He'd play something like the Lost John, only a whole lot different from the way I play it, he just played it straight — they dance all night like that. I think they done this eight-hand set dance, like they do down there, be eight on the floor, four boys an' four girls, an' they call the set, he did have a fellow with him, to play his guitar a little bit, besides the 'set dances,' Boney talks of a buck (he pronounced it both 'buck' and 'bug') dance. 'Fellows get out there an' do the bug dance, you know — that's somethin' like you hear now, people do called the chicken reel — somethin' scale of that. I just learned this 'bout — 'bout you know, people dance, I jus catch, I heard the feet dance, I jus jumps a feetlin' around till I find somethin' to fit in there. Yeah, that's my way back, that bug dance, that's my way back..."
SOMETIME back then, the TERRY family got a phonograph. Well, my brother SANG blues, oh, yes, they used to bang, sing blues like they hide blues, red river blues, blues like they name-wake-up blues — oh, just about, you know — hearin’ a record or some-thing — well, it’s what you wound up, put the record on, you played a record, like — well, oh, Bessie Smith, she was makin’ records along then, we used to play her records, and Mamie Smith, she was playin’ milk cow blues."

Blues, tent shows, preachers, dance music — young Sonny’s musical education was almost complete. Then one day as he was walking down the street, something new came along. "There’s a fellow used to come through here called Devoe Bailey. He used to play the alcolic blues. Oh, he was a little short guy, about — I reckon ‘bout — four feet, he couldn’t play it on blues much, but that alcolic blues, he made a record of that. I don’t know what company, his home was in Nashville. I heard on the radio. He was a pretty good fellow, then. He was about forty-five. He had a little boy with him — I think it was his kid. It was a little act he had. He played a harmony and a boy danced, he played the harmonica, put his hat down, people throwin’ money in hat. He start out all around. Oh, he used to play the fox chase, well, I first heard it, I heard it on a fellow come through playin’ it. I forgot the fellow’s name. He used to come through, playin’ the fox chase, but didn’t play it like we play it now — harmonica wouldn’t be sayin’ nothin’ much, my father, he used to play it, too, too, too! I learned the biggest part from him, and I used to know what it — find it — to a man up above, I used to have it.

From Devoe Bailey, and his father, but not from the stranger, who wouldn’t do sayin’ nothin’ much. Sonny Terry learned to add that certain something that made his music — or music as it seemed to him — complete. "Dogs run the fox, and I used to listen to that barkin' — catch a whole lot of ideas from that. Oh, they run fox, they get on the horses, and dogs run them, they’d get on the dog, which dog would catch the fox."

And there were trains, both the seaboard air line and Southern Railroad went through near Sonny’s home. "Rockin’ the train! About the first piece I learn, I used to hear the freight train come by, I used to be settin’ down sometime, by myself real still. And I’d say I wish I could play that. I used to hear my father do it, a little bit, the freight train carry cars—go, they carry ‘bout thirty-five, forty — they carry right smart, the passenger train, they carry ‘bout, I reckon, be ‘bout seven, eight, of, course, those passenger trains go a little bit faster’n freight train, but not much — they sound near ‘bout like, course you know the same motor, locomotive being pulling it. We used to be out in the field workin’, used to tell the time trains come by, long at ‘even, o’clock, that was up till I was fifteen."

When he was eleven, Sonny had injured himself, "I hit my own self in the left eye, playin’ with a piece of stick. I hittin’ on the chair, piece flew at me. His sight was permanently impaired, then. When I was sixteen, a little boy about four years old hit me in my left (that is, remaining) right eye, we were playin’, and I just threw a little piece of iron, an’ hit me in the right. I loved that completely, I had to quit school, I couldn’t see no more."

Things began to change for Sonny. He had liked school and had always thought he could go on with that, and with working in the fields, until someday he might have a little farm of his own. But now there was this handicap, and two years after it happened, in 1927, timer began to get bad. He did what he could. After I got handicapped, I used to go to town. I used to play on the streets, make money. I didn’t even carry a stick, or nothing, anyway, I done go out, an’ stay out at night twelve. One o’clock — an’ come home. Oh, jus’ walkin'.

Sometimes instead of going into Durham, he gone Raleigh. "I’d go over there an’ play, play an’ come back, sometimes, I played for dancing. Catch the bus myself, then come on back. Sometimes I’d take a kid, or some of my friend’s boys, go with me."

It was this determination to keep going, to make music even if he couldn’t do much else, that led to Carnegie hall, and later, to the part in "FINIAN’S RAINBOW," on a dark night that couldn’t have been much different from any of the other nights when he had been out for his long walk down the back-country roads. A stranger heard him, without Sonny Terry’s ever knowing it, word had got around that he played fine harmonica, the stranger who was sowing the deep south for talent to add to the roster, one of the big phonograph companies, was breathless when he heard Sonny’s strange, different kind of song and music. Before that evening was over, Sonny Terry had a contract to record, a chance to appear at the Carnegie hall concert.

Now, fourteen years later, Sonny Terry can point with pride to all the things that might never have happened! He has made records for Capitol, Decca, Columbia, Folkways; he’s a star performer at folk music festivals everywhere, and his town hall appearances in "Blues at Midnight" series were lauded by the generally tough Broadway press; when his "Harmonica Breakdown" was played over classic—minded, highbrow WOFL of New York as part of a "History of Jazz," prepared by Folkways Records, the switchboard hummed into life as requests for a repeat poured in; he has recorded his same "Breakdown" for the archive of American folk music of the Library of Congress, and Jane Dudley has used the piece in her dance recitals, and his harmonica and song have added a special quality to more than one stage show.

When summer comes, theaters and music groups fire for his services; he appears frequently at the Greek Theatre, in Los Angeles, wherever there’s a need of the bright doings that have made "FINIAN’S RAINBOW," a steady item on revivalist’s showsbills. It’s been this way ever since the curtain first rose on that Piney Bog, and Sonny Terry played banjo and sang backstage for an audience he never saw, that part of it; being backstage and in the dark, would have caused many a Broadway guy or doll to take a ponder on a contract, but darkness was nothing new to Sonny; all he wanted was a chance to be heard.

Litho in U.S.A.