Roscoe Holcomb
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    Recorded by John Cohen

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    Recorded by John Cohen

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He spoke of songs which meant a lot to him, particularly religious songs or those that touch on the difficulties of living. *Motherless Children* is very close to him - he comments on how it is about the tough times that little kids have growing up in the mountains and in the coal camps. He has a memory of having sung the song in New York, and as he came off the stage a man from the audience "with tears coming down his cheeks" said that he didn't like that song at all.

"Buddy, I didn't sing it for you" said Roscoe, thinking the man was trying to start something.

"Don't get me wrong" says the man, "Nothing the matter with you, it's just that the song is too close to home".

Roscoe talks of singing the Old Baptist Hymn Village Churchyard in the back of a car driving through Berkeley, California - while the other passengers, Rita Weil and Mike Seeger were moved to tears.

And often at performances in the past six years, Roscoe has choked up with emotion while singing on stage. In Michigan he had to stop singing during his performance of the Wandering Boy. The stunned audience broke into applause - they were unprepared to face the reality of a grown man choked with emotion triggered by the sentiments of his own song.

It is worthy of reflection here to consider the function of folk music to those who sing it. At the Michigan performance Roscoe was reading the words to the Wandering Boy from a printed songbook. He had performed this song many times before, both for himself at home, and on many music tours. I recall his "lining out" this song with Ralph and Carter Stanley together during the 1966 European tour. During the Michigan performance something special moved him. And I get the impression that his performance is not a performance at all, but becomes an actual event for him. There is no rehearsal for the music. He does not 'practice' at home and the instrument seldom come out of their cases from tour to tour. It is as if each time he sings is like the first time he has sung. In this respect, there is a newness in each performance which may account for the intensity and innovative quality of his sound. When he starts a song certain expectations are presumed, yet unknown qualities remain to be seen. To him the place of music seems to lie dormant in his memory, only coming to life when an audience triggers this latent, intense voice which has become his trademark. During recording was there a second take, nor did he have any particular misgivings about 'bobbles' when he missed a note on guitar or banjo. As opposed to any quest for perfection, the recording became a document of the actuality of that moment.

He spoke of the fact that he never had to 'remember' a song, and how the words just came to him as he sings - how one time he will remember verses, another time they fade away. He told of how he'll remember bits of songs from years ago with no recollection of the source. While talking about Blind Lemon Jefferson whose music he admired, he started to play Mississippi Heavy Water Blues, a song known to me through an old blues record by Barbeque Bob. Roscoe never heard of Barbeque Bob, and in the thirteen years I've known Roscoe, he never hinted at knowing this song. Yet suddenly, there he was singing it into the microphone.

This personal intensity and identification with the song runs contrary to the stereotyped Appalachian model characterized by detachment from feeling and remote from personal experience, singing on song exactly as heard before, with the literary content of primary importance.

At a workshop at the same Michigan Festival the black fiddler Howard Armstrong (of Martin, Began and Armstrong) commented that Roscoe's music was very pure, and that all other musicians including Durchwyn, Beck, Jazz blues or fiddlers all had tricks and devices which they employed to help communicate their music to an audience, and that was what their style was all about. But what Roscoe Holcomb was singing was the music without the devices, it was the core of the musical idea and the real spirit of music which was being heard.

At this point I can only presume that this quality is what has made Roscoe Holcomb's music appreciated far beyond the confines of his home, and mountain community, and beyond the limits of the folklore tradition.
Milk Cow Blues - banjo

Although this tune is from a Negro blues—originally recorded by Kokomo Arnold—it is more likely that it came to Roscoe via Sam and Kirk McGee who also recorded it in a more regularized style with a heavy beat. Sam and Kirk lived in Eastern Kentucky for a number of years. Their influence was probably personally felt as much as their recordings were. It is interesting to see how Roscoe has moved the tune into a more-blues-like sound with irregular timing.

Frankie and Johnny - voice and guitar

There are no indications of how this most conventional version of this song got to Roscoe. In the respect that it reflects little change towards the Appalachian sound, gives one the idea that it is from an outside source. Compared to Louise Foreacre's "Frankie Was A Good Girl" (Folkways 2315) which uses a special banjo tuning for this song, Roscoe's tune and text seem to come from the flatlands. One possibility as to source might be the reference to Trenton. Roscoe worked on a truck-farm in southern New Jersey during World War II.

In London City - voice and banjo

This is one of the most widespread of the Broadside ballads from British sources. Laws lists over thirty versions—p. 260—of the song collected in America. It is also in the repertoire of Jean Ritchie who was raised about 10 miles from Roscoe's home.

Side II

Roll On John - voice and banjo

This fragment of the song is close to the way that Rufus Crisp of Allen Kentucky sang it as Roll On John (recording not available). It is popular throughout the mountains either under this title or as Nine Pound Hammer, and has been recorded by Frank Blevins, the Monroe Brothers, and Merle Travis. It is still alive today in Bluegrass tradition.

Got No Sugar Baby Now - voice and banjo

Dock Boggs probably was the indirect source for this song, and he is one of the few artists who Roscoe acknowledges as a musician whom he admired. The song was recorded commercially both by Dock Boggs and by Charlie Monroe, although it is widespread in oral tradition as well (see Lundsford - Thirty and One Folk Songs from the Southern Mountains as Red Apple Juice). Perhaps the most curious aspect of Roscoe's version is the constant shift of meaning in his use of the term 'baby' moving in context from girlfriend to infant.

Darlin' Cory - voice and banjo

Judging from the banjo tuning, again Dock Boggs may be a source for this version, however, Roscoe mixes in many verses which are not in Boggs' recording of Country Blues. The prison references are in the Boggs text, but the "thirty miles through the rock" is more likely from Boggs' Danville Girl. The song is also known as Hustling Gamblers and has been recorded by B.P. Shelton, the Monroe Brothers, and Flatt and Scruggs as well.

The Village Churchyard - voice unaccompanied (recorded at Cambridge, Mass. by Mark Wilson at a live performance in November, 1972)

This text is from the New Baptist Song Book (song No. 27), which is used in 'lining out' the words to songs at Old Baptist services in the mountains. Roscoe has played this with banjo accompaniment on occasion. The Stanley Brothers recorded this song on King 750-Old Time Camp Meeting, with full instrumental treatment and a tune like Man of Constant Sorrow. Recently Ralph Stanley recorded it unaccompanied—Old Country Church-Rebel 1965 using the same modul tune which Roscoe uses.

Walk Around My Bedside - voice and guitar

I have only heard this song in Holiness church services in the mountains, and a related version sung by Negroes from South Carolina in 1967. The repetitive chant gives the singer the opportunity to dwell on his every moment of weakness or fear, under the watchful vision of the Lord.

Side I

Motherless Children - voice and guitar

Chorus: Mother's little children see a hard time when their mother is dead and gone. (2)

They go hungry they go cold, they go begging from door to door.

Mother's little children see a hard time when their mother is dead and gone.

Father will do the best he can, when their mother is gone (2)

Father will do the best he can but he don't really understand.

Mother's little children see a hard time when their mother is dead and gone.

Chorus: Mother's little children see a hard time when their mother is dead and gone.

Sister will do the best she can, when their mother is dead and gone (2)

Sister will do the best she can, but she really understands.

Mother's little children --

Frankie and Johnnny - voice and guitar

Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts, lord how they could love.

Swore to be true to each other, just as true as the stars above.

Chorus: He was her man, lord lord, but he done her wrong.

Frankie went down to the barroom just for a bucket of beer.

She asked that barroom tender, has my lovin' Johnny been here?

Chorus: He is my man, lord lord, but he done me wrong.

Well you oughtn't to ask me no question, and I'll tell you no lie.

Well your lover left here about a half an hour ago with a girl called Nellie Bligh.

Brother will do the best he can, when mother is dead and gone (2)

Brother will do the best he can but he don't really understand.

Mother's little children see a hard time when their mother is dead and gone.

Mississippi Heavy Water Blues - voice and guitar

Walking down the levee with my head a-hanging low.

Looking for my sweet maids, Lordy she ain't here no more.

Chorus: That's why I'm crying, that's why I'm crying.

I've got the Mississippi Heavy Water Blues.

I'm in Louisiana with this mud all in my shoes

And my girl's in Mississippi with those high water blues.

Chorus: Walking down the road with my hat all in my hand

I'm a looking for the woman that ain't got no man.

Chorus: Train That Carried My Girl From Town - voice and guitar

There goes that train that carried my girl from town

If I knowed her number I'd sure flag her down.

Chorus: Must have been the fast train that carried my girl from town

There goes my girl, somebody call her back

'Cause she's got her hand in my money sack.

Chorus: Supper on the table, b'it a getting cold

Some old rounder stole my jelly roll.

Milk Cow Blues - banjo

Frankie and Johnny - voice and guitar

Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts, lord how they could love.

Swore to be true to each other, just as true as the stars above.

Chorus: He was her man, lord lord, but he done her wrong.

Frankie went down to the barroom just for a bucket of beer.

She asked that barroom tender, has my lovin' Johnny been here?

Chorus: He is my man, lord lord, but he done me wrong.

Well you oughtn't to ask me no question, and I'll tell you no lie.

Well your lover left here about a half an hour ago with a girl called Nellie Bligh.
Chorus:
He was your man...he's a-doing you wrong
Frankie went down to Trenton, with a little while apron on
And under that little white apron, she carried a forty four smokeless gun
Chorus:
She's a-looking for her man...he's a-doing her wrong
Frankie looked over the transom and she saw to her surprise
There on the cot sat Johnnie making love to Nellie Bligh
Chorus:
He is my man...but he's done me wrong
Frankie drew back the kimono and she pulled the little forty four
Rooty toot toot, three times she shot, right through that hard wood door
Chorus:
Cause I shot my man, lord lord, he's a-doing me wrong
Frankie said to the warden, what are they going to do?
And the warden he said to Frankie, there's electric shock today
You can lock me down in a dungeon cell and throw the keys away
Chorus:
Cause I killed your man...that was doing you wrong
Lord this story it has no tomorrow
And this story has no end
And this story, it just goes to show that there ain't no good in men
Chorus:
Cause I killed my man...he's a-doing me wrong

In London City - voice and banjo
In London City is where I dwell
It's the butcher boy that I love so well.
He courted me my heart away
And now with me he will not stay
He took a girl in London town
He walked right in and he set right down
He picked this girl up on his knee
And he told to her what he wouldn't tell me

Side 2

Roll On Buddy - voice and banjo
Oh roll on Buddy, don't you roll so slow
How can I roll when the wheels won't go
Oh roll on Buddy, and make your time
I'm broke down, and I can't make mine
Oh roll on Buddy, and make your time
The wheels broke down, and I can't make mine.

Got No Sugar Baby Now - voice and banjo
It's who will rock the cradle and who will sing this song
Who will rock the cradle when I'm gone (2)
I will rock the cradle and I will sing the song
I will rock the cradle when you're gone (2)
I've got no use for my red rocking chair
I've got no honey baby now, I've got no sugar baby now
Who will rock the cradle and who will sing this song
Who will rock my baby when I'm gone, who will rock the baby when I'm gone
I will rock the cradle and I will sing this song
I'll be good to the baby while you're gone
I got no use for my red rocking chair
I got no honey baby now.

Darlin' Cory - voice and banjo
Wake up, wake up darlin' Cory
What makes you sleep so sound
The highway robbers are coming
They're raging through your town
Last night I lay on my pillow
Tonight I lay on the bed
With the cold prison guards all around me
And the concrete all under my head

It's thirty miles through the rock
Tis sixty to the sand
And I relate to you, the life
Of a many poor married man

It's fifteen cents is all the money I've got
One dollar is all I crave
All I need is a forty four gun
For to put you in your lonesome grave

It's when I'm dead and buried
My friends will be standing around
Place a quart of whiskey on my breast
And watch that poor rounder go down.

Village Churchyard - voice alone
In a dear old village churchyard
I can see a mossy mound
That is where my mother's sleeping
In that cold and silent ground

Gently weeps that weeping willow
Sweet little birds to sing at dawn
I have no one left to love me
Since my mother's dead and gone

I was young but I remember
Well the night my mother died
There I saw her spirit fading
When she called me to her side
Saying darling I must leave you
Angel voices guide you on
Pray that we may meet in heaven
Where your mother's dead and gone

Oft I wander to the churchyard
Flowers to plant with tender care
On the grave of my dear mother
Darkness finds me weeping there.

Looking at the stars above me
Waiting for an early dawn
There by mother I'll be buried
And no more be left alone.

Walk Around My Bedside - voice and guitar

It's walk around my bedside, Lord, walk around (2)
It's walk around my bedside, Lord walk around

When I am sick Lord, walk around (2)
When I am sick, Lord walk around
Walk around my bedside Lord
When I am praying, Lord walk around (2)
When I am praying, Lord walk around
Walk around my bedside Lord

When I am dying, Lord walk around (2)
When I am dying, Lord walk around
Walk around my bedside Lord
Walk around my bedside, please walk around

When I am buried, Lord walk around (2)
When I am buried, Lord walk around,
Walk around my bedside, Lord

Walk around my bedside Lord walk around (2)
Walk around my bedside Lord.