SONNY TERRY
The Folkways Years, 1944-1963

13. Lost John
Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica (Folkways 32035, July 1954)
"Lost John" is another demonstration of a harmonica player's skills, its
dramatic text, which Terry omits in this version, usually tells of a
slave or prisoner trying to escape from servitude or prison.

Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Caryl
McManus, maracas (Folkways 32028, 1953);
"A Man Is Nothing But A Fool" presents an archetypal bluesman's
complaint: you can't trust a woman because she will leave you for
one reason or another. Brownie's creative chordal accompaniment
holds together this nicely understated performance.

15. Poor Man
Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; J.C. Burns, bones and vocals (Folkways
2366, 1958)
This is another blues-like piece that Terry often performed with
Brownie McGhee. Here it features J.C. Burns' bones as a percussion
accompaniment.

16. I've Been Your Doggie Since I Been Your Man
Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; J.C. Burns,
bones (Folkways 32021, 1958)
Echoing a common theme in African American music, Terry performs
this strong blues duet to the accompaniment of McGhee's guitar and his
nephew's percussion on the bones. Although bones have been used
as a percussive device by southern Blacks since the early eighteenth
century, they are very rarely heard today.

17. Custard Pie Blues
Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; unknown performer on washboard,
washboard banjo, bones, fiddle, banjo, vocal refrain (Folkways 32008, 1952)
The full percussion section gives special dynamics to this song, which
Sonny had been performing since at least the 1930s. The washboard
alternates between a "walking bass" and one accented by a dotted
rhythm, adding to its interest. The vocal refrain is probably added by
one of the percussionists.

Acknowledgments
The author wishes to thank Neil Staven for his help with
previously unpublished discographical information as well as Jeff Place
and Lori Turner of the Office of Folklore Programs, for their
assistance locating unpublished material in the Folkways archive.

Credits:
Compiled and annotated by Kip Lornell
Cover photograph by David Gahr
Cover design by Carol Hardy
Remastered by Alan Yoshida at The Mastering Labs,
Hollywood, Calif.
Mission production supervision by Anthony Seeger and Matt Watters
with the assistance of Christopher Jerde
SONNY TERRY
The Folkways Years, 1944-1963

1. **Old Jabo** 2:10
   (Brownie McGhee/Stormking, BMI)
2. **Going Down Slow** 2:51
   (James Oden/St. Louis Music, BMI)
3. **Crow Jane Blues** 1:59
4. **Harmonica with Slaps** 2:01
5. **Pick A Bale of Cotton** 2:30
   (Huddie Ledbetter/Alan Lomax, Folkways Music/TRO, BMI)
6. **Dark Road** 2:43
   (Brownie McGhee/Stormking Music, Inc., BMI)
7. **Skip To My Lou** 1:21
8. **The Woman is Killing Me** 2:23
9. **Jail House Blues** 5:02
10. **Fox Chase/Right on that Shore** 2:24
    (McGhee/Terry/Hollis Music Inc., BMI)
11. **Shortnin’ Bread** 2:00
12. * **Sweet Woman** 3:04
13. **Lost John** 3:07
14. **A Man Is Nothing but a Fool** 3:18
    (Sonny Terry/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
15. **Poor Man (But a Good Man)** 3:08
16. **I’ve Been Your Doggie Since I Been Your Man** 3:53
17. **Custard Pie Blues** 2:47
    (Sonny Terry/Hollis Music, Inc., BMI)

* Previously unreleased

When 31 year-old harmonica master Sonny Terry arrived in New York in 1942, he was already primed for his new musical life after working with Blind Boy Fuller, Brownie McGhee and others back in his North Carolina homeland. Beginning with his 1938 debut at the “Spirituals to Swing” Carnegie Hall concert, Sonny Terry laid the groundwork for his four decade career as a blues harmonica great. This collection captures the essence and breadth of his Folkways recordings from that era.

Descriptive notes enclosed.

Compiled and annotated by Kip Lornell
Cover photograph by David Gahr
Cover design by Carol Hardy
Remastered by Alan Yoshida at The Mastering Lab, Hollywood, Cal.
Reissue production supervision by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters with the assistance of Christopher Jerde

Smithsonian Folkways
Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings
Office of Folklife Programs
955 L’Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600
Smithsonian Institution
Washington DC 20560

© 1991 Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings • Nationally distributed by Rounder Records • One Camp Street • Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140 USA • Printed in Canada.
Sonny Terry on Folkways Records

This anthology is a selection from among Sonny Terry's recordings that highlights his large repertory and his harmonica playing. Only a few cuts were selected from each of his original LP titles. As with the rest of the Folkways catalogue, all of Sonny Terry's Folkways titles are available on cassette by mail order from the Smithsonian Institution. They have been recorded from the master tapes onto high quality audio cassettes, which are packaged with the original LP documentation. For a complete Folkways catalogue telephone 202/287-3262, fax 202/287-3699, or write Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, Office of Folklore Programs, 955 Tenth Plaza Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.

Folkways albums by Sonny Terry include:
Folkways 2210 Washboard Band Country Dance Music (cassette)
Folkways 2227 Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry (reissued in 1990 as Smithsonian/Folkways SFH001, on CD, LP and cassette)
Folkways 2230 Terry, Sonny On the Road (cassette)
Folkways 2412. Pete Seeger and Sonny Terry in Concert (cassette)
Folkways 3891 Blues to Big Brown Boy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee (cassette)
Folkways 3821 Sonny Terry's New Sound (cassette)
Folkways 3206 Sonny Terry's Washboard Band (cassette)
Folkways 3206b Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Get On Board (cassette)
Folkways 3203 Sonny Terry, Harmonica (cassette)
SF 4016 Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Sing (a reissue of 3237 on CD, LP and cassette)
SF 4013 Brownie McGhee The Folkways Years 1945-1959 (an anthology of Brownie McGhee recordings, some of which feature Sonny Terry as well, on CD and cassette).

Blues on Smithsonian/Folkways Reissues

Many blues recordings by superb artists are available on audio cassette and are listed in The Whole Folkways Catalogue. Some of these have been carefully remastered, annotated, and re-issued on CD and cassette on the Smithsonian/Folkways label. These are commercially distributed to record stores and mail order houses. Among them are:
SF 40001 Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly, Folkways, The Original Volland.
SF 40009 Elizabeth Cotton, Freight Train and Other North Carolina Sings and Tunes.
SF 40010 Leadbelly Sings Folk Songs.
SF 40011 Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing Blues.
SF 40019 Lippin' Hepcats.
SF 40023 Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs.
SF 40034 Brownie McGhee, The Folkways Years.
SF 40035 Reverend Gary Davis, Pian Religioso and Bad Company.
Ask for these at your local record store or order by phone from Roundup Records 1-800-443-4727.

Sonny Terry, The Folkways Years, 1944-1963

Compiled and annotated by Kip Lornell

This anthology of 17 songs, selected from the eight LP albums Sonny Terry recorded for Folkways Records and from previously unreleased acetates, illustrates the remarkable variety of styles employed by this brilliant harmonica player. Sonny Terry and Folkways founder Moses Asch enjoyed a long and highly rewarding professional association from 1944 until 1959. This selection displays all of the facets of their long-term collaboration, drawing mostly from Terry's 1950s recordings. It demonstrates Terry's ability to perform blues, religious, and folk material. Two items, "Going Down Slow" and "Sweet Woman," were found among acetate recordings housed in the Folkways Archive at the Smithsonian's Office of Folklore Programs and are being released here for the first time. The rest were taken from the Folkways albums listed in the discography.

The Harmonica Player's Harmonica Player

Mastering the harmonica is not a simple task. It looks so deceptively easy—you merely place it to your lips, then blow and suck. Yet when you try it yourself, you discover there is much more to playing the instrument. Then you listen more carefully to such blues players as Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, Noah Lewis, and Sonny Terry and wonder how they do it. Eventually some of their "how's" begin to emerge from your very own harmonica. Twenty years later you still marvel at your own Navette in thinking that within one day you could replicate Little Walter's classic solos on "Juke." The truth is that virtuoso mouth harp players—from jazz wizard Toots Thielemann to classically trained John Sebastian (butter of the Lovin' Spoonful's lead)—have spent years perfecting their craft. So did Sonny Terry, who played the mouth harp for more than six decades. He always stayed with the ten-hole diatonic model, which remains essentially unchanged since its perfection in Germany in the 1830s. Rural American folk musicians have been playing the instrument since the mid-nineteenth century and during the 1920s and 1930s musicians such as Pop Stoneman and Bill Cox often used them on commercial country records.

The harmonica has been a favorite among African-American musicians because of its portability, its low cost, and its almost human sounds. In the hands and at the lips of a master such as Sonny Terry, the harmonica can produce an amazing variety of sounds. Listening to Terry as a solo artist is particularly rewarding because of his ability to manipulate this small instrument in so many ways. Most famous is his "Fox Chase," where he uncannily reproduces a cacophony of sounds that comes you from the beginning to the end of the hunt. Since the early 1950s African-American blues musicians have frequently used harmonicas as lead instruments in electric bands. Many of Muddy Waters' most exciting recordings included the best of the local "blowers" Little Walter, Jimmy Cotton, Big Walter Horton, and Henry Stagg. Playing their instruments directly into a microphone and amplifier, these musicians approach the fluidity of jazz saxophonists. They achieve a raw, powerful, emotional sound that is charged with tremendous energy, which influenced so many rock musicians from the 1960s to the present—including ZZ Top, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin, and others. Sonny Terry too, occasionally recorded through an amplifier with results surprisingly close to his more urban brothers. However, in keeping with Moses Asch's own aesthetics, the selections he recorded for Folkways were all acoustic.

* Previously unreleased
Moses Asch, founder and head of Folkways Records from 1947 to 1978, was a key figure in shaping Sonny Terry’s career once the duo began playing. Asch saw the potential in the blues and roots music played by the likes of the Browns and later in the work of the Mose’s. Asch felt that artists’ music should be molded into new styles for the sake of popular appeal, but he believed strongly in doing that, he didn’t know. Musical styles and songs to bring him home. This is one of the tougher things: an artist in the studio who wants to be an interpreter. With Leadbelly, certainly. Leadbelly, I don’t know what they knew. They wanted you, they just set them in motion in . . .

Sonny Terry’s Folkways recordings reflect Asch’s attitude toward his artists. Most of the recordings are with Brownie McGhee, but Asch carefully placed Terry in other comfortably familiar settings: a country board-washboard band (2006), “Sonny Terry’s Washboard Band” or as a solo artist (3103 “Sonny Terry, Harmonica”). Terry recorded his first Ace 78 rpm record (“Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, ‘Walk and Talk’”) from the folk guitar style that Woody Guthrie played. Because he didn’t want to duplicate the efforts of other recordings, he recorded Sonny with a small electric blues band or with a full section.

Sonny Terry’s Life

Born on October 24, 1911, in Greensboro, North Carolina, Sonny Terry spent much of his childhood in Shelby, Charlotte, like his father. Terry began playing harmonica and banjo, but he was drawn to playing blues and dance tunes. Significantly, this period pre-dates the invention of the blues slide. Terry recalls that “My father . . . used to play harmonica at them Saturday night fish fries and some things. He didn’t do no blues. I never heard blues before I was about eight, maybe.” Sonny Terry’s earliest memories of playing blues were of his older brothers’ band, but they played his blues songs, which he called “slip songs.” He never sang “walkin’” over there walkin’, you know. And I saw it over there . . . By the time I learned to play, he never had someone to play with. So me and him got together, and that was about 300. We played till about 6:00 and that was the way it first met. We played to get to make a record together. I’d heard his records, you know, and so by the seven or eight months I was ten, I went on (to) Durham. And got with him; I stayed with him about a year” (Blatt 263). The year was 1937 and this chance encounter moved Terry into a new realm of professionalism. It provided him with the chance to record and played as a leader. His local 1,000-person performances, nearly ten years later both he and Brownie were of the “Call on a Hot Tin Roof” band, and they had a hit. Sonny Terry recorded many tracks in the 1930s, both as a solo artist and with Brownie McGhee. Terry’s earliest recordings brought his music to the attention of many serious musicians and aficionados of the blues, and he was already recognized as an innovator. Nonetheless, Sonny Terry did not entirely lose his roots behind. He continued to play local clubs with Brownie McGhee and others. Together they explored the post-war “race” records market, recorded with various blues and folk bands, and recorded with a host of other regional labels. Terry’s distinctive harmonica style, sounding almost anachronistic in light of the early, heavily amplified Chicago blues style, had spread to Big Walter Horton, and other blues players of the time.

Moses Asch became one of Terry’s staunch supporters. Asch retained a fondness for southern black folk music, as evidenced by the numerous recordings released on Folkways Records, including, among others, Memphis Slim, and others. By the mid-1950s, Terry’s audience had expanded to include a public interested in folk music outside the blues-based scene. In 1954 with a solo album, Terry recorded regularly for Folkways. These recordings captured all important aspects of Terry’s repertoire, sometimes in interesting or different settings, Folkways LP 30228, for instance, brought Brownie and Sonny together with marcas player Royal McPhatter. Terry was also paired with his harmonica playing nephew, CBurns, on Folkways LP 2689, which included fine examples of harmonica duets, a harmonica and bones duet, and other unusual performances rarely heard on record. Asch’s emphasis on blues and folk music was evident in the album covers for Brownie McGhee’s “Washboard Country Band” which included Pete Seeger’s banjo, Billie Holiday’s blues, and Billy Robinson’s bass. With tunes such as “Cody,” “New Joe Clark,” and “Creekie” this 1963 recording reflects music from 1943.

Despite Brownie McGhee’s departure for the West Coast about 1960, the duo continued working together. Sonny remained in New York City, sometimes reprising his role of solo “guest” artist. He and Brownie were both key players in the 1960s folk recording sessions, both for Bluegrass and for blues. These recording sessions for Bluegrass, but they were not close personal friends. The personal pockering became evident on stage and they played together less frequently in later years. Terry continued to

These connections led Sonny to more long-term musical employment. In 1946, for instance, he landed a part in a Broadway production of the musical, Casablanca again and again, and likely a thousand performances. Nearly ten years later both he and Brownie were of the successful “Call on a Hot Tin Roof” band, and they had a hit. Sonny Terry recorded many tracks in the 1930s, both as a solo artist and with Brownie McGhee. Together they explored the post-war “race” records market, recorded with various blues and folk bands, and recorded with a host of other regional labels. Terry’s distinctive harmonica style, sounding almost anachronistic in light of the early, heavily amplified Chicago blues style, had spread to Big Walter Horton, and other blues players of the time.

Moses Asch became one of Terry’s staunch supporters. Asch retained a fondness for southern black folk music, as evidenced by the numerous recordings released on Folkways Records, including, among others, Memphis Slim, and others. By the mid-1950s, Terry’s audience had expanded to include a public interested in folk music outside the blues-based scene. In 1954 with a solo album, Terry recorded regularly for Folkways. These recordings captured all important aspects of Terry’s repertoire, sometimes in interesting or different settings, Folkways LP 30228, for instance, brought Brownie and Sonny together with marcas player Royal McPhatter. Terry was also paired with his harmonica playing nephew, CBurns, on Folkways LP 2689, which included fine examples of harmonica duets, a harmonica and bones duet, and other unusual performances rarely heard on record. Asch’s emphasis on blues and folk music was evident in the album covers for Brownie McGhee’s “Washboard Country Band” which included Pete Seeger’s banjo, Billie Holiday’s blues, and Billy Robinson’s bass. With tunes such as “Cody,” “New Joe Clark,” and “Creekie” this 1963 recording reflects music from 1943.

Despite Brownie McGhee’s departure for the West Coast about 1960, the duo continued working together. Sonny remained in New York City, sometimes reprising his role of solo “guest” artist. He and Brownie were both key players in the 1960s folk recording sessions, both for Bluegrass and for blues. These recording sessions for Bluegrass, but they were not close personal friends. The personal pockering became evident on stage and they played together less frequently in later years. Terry continued to
About the compiler

Kip Lornell received his Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology from Memphis State University. In addition to teaching at the University of Virginia and the college of William and Mary, he was for many years associated with the Blue Ridge Institute of Ferrum College and has been a postdoctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution. His publications include Happy in the Service of the Lord (University of Illinois 1986) and Virginia Blues, Country and Gospel Records, 1925-1943: An Annotated Discography (University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

Selections

1. Old Jabo
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar (Folkways, 2327, November 1957)

   "Jabo" refers to an older, almost mythical, character in southern Black folk culture whose humorous misfortunes are described in this lively song. He is reminiscent of another southern folk hero, Lost John, though Jabo is not as clever. The song's static harmony is enlivened by McGhee's inventive single string guitar runs. This piece also breaks a number of other early Black secular songs such as " Ain't that Skipper and Flynn?"

2. Going Down Slow
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar (previously unrecorded from about 1950)

   This is a rather early "cover" version of James Oden's sad lament about failing health, death, and a longing for the South. The song itself is a blues standard and has been recorded scores of times.

3. Crow Jane
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar (previously unrecorded from about 1950)

   The title of this piece does not refer to a bird, but was an African-American colloquial term for a woman. According to Terry this was one of the first songs he learned, in the 1920s. It is an eight-bar blues well known in the Piedmont section of the southeastern United States.

4. Harmonica with Slips
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; J.C. Burns, body slaps (Folkways, 2369, 1952)

   This spirited performance underscores the importance of persuasive effects in African-American folk music. In other instances the persuasion might be supplied on a washboard, spoons, or even the jawbone of an ox or cow. This is wonderful music for cutting a "back and wing," dance, which Sonny Terry undoubtedly did at country dances on many Saturday nights in Shelby, North Carolina. Body slaps also provide the backdrop for the children's "Hambone" game.

5. Pick a Bale of Cotton
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Goya Mahon, maracas (Folkways, 30208, 1955)

   Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter) is the source for this song, which he popularized before his death in 1949. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee shared an apartment with Leadbelly for a time in the early 1940s and adopted a number of his songs. This lively performance utilizes a call and response format that is distinguished by McKean's deep bass voice.

6. Dark Road
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Goya Mahon, maracas (Folkways, 2327, 1957)

   This is a blues about losing a loved one and the subsequent desire to travel. Its tone is more somber than many of Sonny Terry's recordings from this period. "Dark Road" is also distinguished by the vocal lead and Goya Moore's subtle drumming.

7. Skip to my Lou
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; William Edward Cook, washboard; Pete Seeger, fiddle (Folkways, 2207, 1943)

   "Skip to my Lou; "Cindy," "Old Joe Clark," and other similar tunes are most often associated with Anglo-American folk music, but are part of a pan-racial southern tradition that backs up to the post-Reconstruction era. This version of the well-known play party song is highlighted by an expanded ensemble that includes not only a strong bass but Cook's delightful, sometimes whimsical, washboard work and Pete Seeger's fiddle and banjo.

8. The Woman is Killing Me
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; unknown performer on washboard, washboard bass, banjo, and fiddle (Folkways, 2327, 1957)

   Although Sonny Terry is the only soloist, the large percussion ensemble accompanying him adds to the unique sound of this piece.

The syncopated rhythm gives it the feel of a deep south African-American life and drum band, with Terry taking the part of the fife player.

Tail House Blues
Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Sticks McGhee, guitar (Folkways, 2369, 1958)

This lament is a soulful, slow blues with lyrics about the singer's release from jail. The texture is enriched by McGhee's electric guitar and the use of two harmonicas, one of which is probably played by Terry's nephew, J.C. Burns. It is also possible, though, that Terry himself simply overdubbed the second harmonica.

10. Fox Chase/Right On That Shore
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Pete Seeger, vocal and banjo (Folkways, 2412, 1919)

   The first part of this medley is a truly stunning, albeit brief, performance by Sonny Terry that underscores the subtlety of his playing. His mixture of voice and harmonica makes for a masterful work. An imitation of a fox chased by hounds is a test of the harmonica player's skills, though banjo and fiddle players sometimes provide the "right on that shore" that's so often necessary to the fox hunt. This single-verse fox hunt gospel hymn that Terry probably heard back in early in the century. Sonny's piercing banjo provides a sharp contrast to the usual guitar accompaniment on Terry's harmonica.

13. Shortnin' Bread
   Sonny Terry, vocal; Pete Seeger, guitar (Folkways, 3821, 1958)

   Although Terry is primarily remembered as a blues player, this is one of the many children's songs that Sonny Terry knew and occasionally performed. Many of Pete Seeger's achievements to explore their folk repertory and Folkways is only the record company to document the extent of Terry's versatility. His performance on the instrument was only called a "jew's harp" or "jew's harp" adds another dimension to his musical breadth.

12. Sweet Woman
   Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar (previously unrecorded acetate recording)

   This is vintage, hard-hitting Terry and McGhee performing a tough blues, as they do so often for black audiences in both the South and New York City. This selection was encountered in the Folkways Archive with "S.T. & B.H.M." written in thick pen on the label of the acetate recording disc. It is possibly an alternate take to "S.10-066i" which was probably recorded early in 1946.