BROWNIE MCGHEE
The Folkways Years, 1945-1959

16. Can't Help Myself
Brownie McGhee, guitar and vocals; Sonny Terry, vocals and harmonica; Gene Moore, drums (Folkways 2327, November 1957).
The interplay between Brownie's voice and Sonny's harmonica is one of the highlights in this buoyant performance. Moore's drums provide a "lilk" that gives this the sound of a commercial Rhythm and Blues single rather than a Folkways album. Note the irony dripping from McGhee's voice when he sings, "Do you want me, baby, to be like Jesse James (oh) To kill some man and rob some passenger train?"

17. Pallet on the Floor
Brownie McGhee, guitar and vocals (Folkways 2422, 1959).
This is another of the many secular songs that Brownie learned during the 1920s and 1930s. The roughly 15-bar sequence is similar in structure to the blues, but it lacks the strict A-A-B rhyme scheme. Many of the early recorded rural Black singers, such as Mississippi John Hurt and Willie Brown, knew similar songs.

Acknowledgements:
Special thanks to Nail Sklen for supplying previously unpublished discographical information and to Jeff Place and Lori Taylor, archivists of the Office of Folklife Programs for material from the Folkways archives.

Credits
Selected and annotated by Kip Lornell
Cover photograph by David Gehr
Cover design by Carol Hardy
Remastered by Alan Yoshida at The Mastering Lab, Hollywood, CAl.
Reissue coordination by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters with the assistance of Christopher Jerde;
Archival assistance by Jeff Place and Lori Taylor

* Previously unreleased
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1. Daisy 3:22
   (Brownie McGhee/Bob-Dan Music Inc. BMI)
2. Rising Sun 2:40
   (Brownie McGhee/Stormking Music Inc. BMI)
3. Careless Love 3:13
4. Cholly Blues 5:04
5. Just a Dream 4:21
6. Pawn Shop Blues 3:01
   (Brownie McGhee/Pru Music Inc. BMI)
7. Hangman's Blues 4:33
8. Living With the Blues 2:52
   (Brownie and Ruth McGhee/Screen Gems EMI Music Inc. BMI)
9. ‘Fore Day Creep 4:10
10. Me and Sonny 2:47
11. Raise a Ruckus Tonight 2:49
12. Betty and Dupree 3:59
   (Brownie McGhee/Preston Stevens Music [PRS], BMI)
13. Long Gone 3:13
15. I'm Gonna Tell God How You Treat Me 2:32
16. Can't Help Myself 3:17
   (Brownie McGhee/Stormking Music, Inc. BMI)
17. Pallet on the Floor 3:09

* Previously unreleased

Few blues musicians have possessed the combination of skill, personality and
influence that enabled this guitar master to prosper as a performer and a recording
artist. Countless blues guitarists and enthusiasts came under Brownie’s spell
and found something genuine and inspiring in his music. These performances,
culled from his Folkways recordings, reveal the artistry and passion which Brownie
McGhee brought to the blues.

Descriptive notes enclosed.

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Brownie McGhee, Blues Singer
Notes by Kip Lornell

This compilation of 18 songs selected from the six LP albums Brownie McGhee recorded for Folkways Records and from a previously unreleased acetate illustrates the remarkable musicality of this bluesman and the history of the blues. The performances here are among his very best. In addition to musical excellence, these tracks display McGhee's versatile repertoire. The older blues-ballads, such as "Woke Up This Morning" and "Sick and Tired," sound as convincing and heartfelt as the autobiographical "Me and Sonny." To complete this Folkways/Scanned Folksongs Collection, Office of Folklore Programs, 955 Infant Plaza Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. Folkways albums by Brownie McGhee include:

Folkways 2030 Brownie McGhee Blues (cassette)
Folkways 2421 Traditional Blues Volume 1 (cassette)
Folkways 2422 Traditional Blues Volume 2 (cassette)
Folkways 2557 Brownie McGhee Sings the Blues (cassette)
Folkways 32028 Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Get On Board (cassette)
Smithsonian/Folkways 4001 I Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry (a reissue of Folkways 2257) on CD; LP; and cassette.

Blues on Smithsonian/Folkways Reissues
Many blues recordings by superb artists are available on audio cassette and are listed in the "Smithsonian Folksongs." Some of these have been carefully adapted, 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 Paintings
SF 40009 Elizabeth Cotton, Freight Train and Other North Carolina Songs and Tunes
SF 40010 Leadbelly Sings Folk Songs
SF 40011 Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing Blues
SF 40012 Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs
SF 40033 Sonny Terry, The Folkways Years 1944-1963

Ask for these Smithsonian/Folkways titles at your local record store or order by phone from Roundup Records 1-800-443-4727

Brownie McGhee was always looking for ways to expand his audience. By the late 1950's he had become a fixture on the coffeehouse and festival circuit. Recordings such as those on this anthology first exposed many younger white folk music enthusiasts to the blues.

In addition to representing Brownie McGhee's strong Folksongs catalogue, this compilation particularly emphasizes his impressive guitar technique and his feeling for reshaping blues lyrics. McGhee's final three albums for Folkways are especially interesting because they are solo efforts that mine his older and more traditional repertory. By 1959 Brownie had been a blues professional for more than two decades, arranging a storehouse of both traditional songs and blues themes. Original compositions based on older forms. "Grievin' Hearted Blues" and "Please Don't Dog Your Woman" are examples of this process.

The solo performances in this collection are balanced by those that include other performers. Sonny Terry is the most enduring and important of Brownie's musical partners and he appears in several selections. In addition to providing instrumental support, Terry also sang with Brownie on "Heart in Sorrows." The only significant aspects of McGhee's style missing here are his rhythm 'n' blues performances. For ten years, beginning in the middle 1940's, McGhee frequently performed with a small band, often consisting of banjo, drums, and piano, and some reed players. Most of his commercial singles from this decade feature such a line-up, but the Asch recordings represent a different period in McGhee's career—one that reflected his new-found audience and his producer's own musical sensibilities.

McGhee's own story is fascinating in itself. It deserves a recounting, both for its own inherent interest as well as the experiences and recollections that reflect the lives of many of his contemporaries. Like the majority of his musical friends, McGhee's life began not in the streets of New York City, but rather in rural Tennessee.

A long-time resident of Oakland, California, Walter "Brownie" McGhee retains strong musical ties to the blues and country dance music of the southeastern states. As a native of Knoxville, Tennessee (born November 30, 1915), McGhee grew up in a family that supported his interests in a musical environment that helped to shape his later career. Brownie may be best known as a guitarist, but he also played the banjo and piano. The keyboard, in fact, was his first instrument and he accompanied Buddy Moss on the piano during the 1943 Oklaho recording session. How Brownie became associated with Buddy Moss in Burlington, North Carolina, reveals some interesting facts about his own background and that of other influential southeastern blues artists.
In his early years, Brownie McGhee was a wandering performer. He entertained workers at the rough, segregated coal fields camps around Robertstown, West Virginia, during the middle of the Depression. McGhee recalls: "I went here and there and I met some friends and they invited me into Commerce, West Virginia. I went down there and stayed almost a year. I went from camp to camp, but what I remember they didn't pay off in money, they paid off in script. And if you played around the commissary—if you kept a crowd around, they'd give you your money for your script. I was around places like Keytomayo. But they had a Black sheriff there and those were days they carried pistols like a western city!" (All quotations from Brownie McGhee are taken from an interview with "Tin Roof in Oakland, California in 1960 and "Tin Roof in Oakland, California in 1949.)

By 1938 Brownie left the mountains and returned to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where he spent a few months playing on the streets. By now an experienced man of the blues, McGhee knew how to find a cheap but safe place to live and the right places to find biscuits, ham, gravy, and eggs. He soon learned where to play when the RJ Reynolds employees came out of the factories with their weekly paychecks in hand. Many of them wanted to hear the latest blues songs to Blind Boy Fuller, whose records they heard on their "piccolos" (juke boxes). After several severe alterations with Chief-of-Policet Feather regarding a "Tennesseeigger" ringing the streets, on the streets and his new-found harp playing friend, Junior Webb, headed east. They followed Highway 70 for about fifty miles and ended up in Winston because they heard that the man who managed Blind Boy Fuller lived in town.

Even though Webb and McGhee soon learned that Fuller himself lived another thirty miles down the road in Durham, they quickly found J.B. Long. Being something of a talent scout, Long wanted to hear the duo perform, especially Brownie's original composition "Me and My Dog Blues." "Good Lord," he said. "I call to mind a manager and a friend, immediately took McGhee under his wing suggesting that they might want to make phonograph records. Brownie McGhee made records at an early age and had seen how that recognition and thus his value as a street musician. But he also wanted to meet Blind Boy Fuller, an impostor that he regrets to this day. He wanted to make records as well as to learn the blues and to be recognized as a blues musician. In the same spirit to keep the blues alive in Piedmont, North Carolina, Fuller observed "'McGhee you haven't made any records, you seem to be an upset. But keep it up. 'Fuller didn't say 'Keep on messin''. That's what I wanted to hear."

Because of Fuller's arrogant attitude, the two musicians remained cordial but not close. McGhee's relationship with Long, however, continued unabated. Long launched McGhee's recording career; helped negotiate his contracts, and suggested various ways to improve his lot.  Most approached Long about recording after he left Georgia following an unfortunate encounter with the police. His recording career had faltered and Buddy was looking for a new start. It was through Long that McGhee met his wife, Brownie and Sonny Terry also became "partnered" through Long's benign intervention in 1941 when he sought someone to accompany the great blues singer, Roberta Martin, in the Long's recording session at the Library of Congress.

Eventually McGhee moved to New York City where he enjoyed a dual career as a blues singer for the black community and a southern blues champion for the white intelligentsia that was just discovering "folk music" from the South. In 1948 he played in the black clubs both as a solo blues performer and as a pioneer of the emerging rhythm & blues style. He formed such notable groups as the Mighty House Rockers and the Three Blues to play the tough clubs. Eventually he also arranged many record sessions for the numerous independent record companies that had sprung up in and around New York City—Atlantic, Savoy, Sittin' in With Harlem, and others. McGhee became fairly well known within his own community as an entertainer who colorful recording pseudonyms like Spider Sam and Tennessee Gal. McGhee also became an integral member of the New York City folk music scene, which has also been characterized as the "urban folk revival." This period marked a time when music lovers in northern cities began to discover their roots, most often in the form of southern rural traditions—stray bands and blues in bars. The best-known members of the urban folk revival had various backgrounds. Pete Seeger, for instance, came from a highly educated family with strong ties to both classical and traditional music. On the other hand, Woody Guthrie emerged from the southwestern United States with his musical identity already established by his years as an itinerant "camp follower." He left the group in 1938, forming a group in 1945, and was impressed and admired the songs of the southern-born musicians—Josh White, Huddie Ledbetter, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee. McGhee at first doubted that he would find a substantial white audience. "What you need in New York for me I fear they to make records," he thought. McGhee was right, many were impressed that the people were starving to death in New York for what I do."

As a result of this popularity and support, the music was altered to fit the clubs and audiences. In place of the classic "classic" blues, McGhee and Sonny Terry created their own style—"telling stories" through the blues, orientied folksingers found a new way of doing business. Brownie McGhee recalls that after a while "Josh wasn't doing blues. He was doing folk and running around with Libby Holman, wearing a low-cut shirt and opening for her in big white clubs. I found out they were seeing money. Quite naturally I put Josh in a whole different category, say he's gone white!"

By the late 1940s the man who had earlier recorded tough blues such as "High Brown Chester," "Black and Evil Blues," "Bed Springs Blues," and "Sweet Tweet Mama Blues" now sang "Evil Apple Tree" and "I Lay A Dream." In folk clubs around New York City, Brownie McGhee, the pragmatic street musician, was happy to accommodate this new audience, up to a point. His comments on this issue reveal a deep ambivalence—"I put it together myself. I do it in my way, so I can get some money. Psychologically, deep down inside of me, it didn't do anything to me." Certainly this new-found approach served him well, and his music was featured in several venues: the Village Vanguard, the Blue Angel, and eventually club dates in Canada and Europe. Brownie McGhee also thought about personal friends, came to be so clearly identified that it became impossible to separate them for long. Although McGhee often appeared with Big Chief Ellis, Leedley, and others, it was Sonny Terry who remained his closest musical comrade. Both men were caught in the urban folk revival in a series of recordings and live performances that swept across several decades. It was as a duo that they first gained the attention of Mose Allison, founder of Folkways Records. But over the years McGhee was wise enough to have Terry and McGhee record separately as well as together. He knew that they retained strong individual identities apart from their long-standing partnership.

Particularly because Mose Allison permitted them such leeway, Brownie retains fond, often humorous memories of his. "Mose was my A-1 man. I met him through Leedley and was soon recording. He gave me every chance I ever had! I once asked him why would he ever do that. He was putting that money down, I got to make a few records and he asked 'Don't you want to clear your sheet with me? All that money you've been sitting on, don't you want your share?' Then it flashed in my mind that I been getting a lot of five and ten dollar bills from Mose. I thought, well that's alright. And the set up the date. When they showed up for the date, Mose said 'you're place has highlighted many talents as a composer and traditional blowers. But his role was not limited to the blues for the urban folk scene called for musical versatility. McGhee was one of the early Folkways catalogues and Archives contain examples of Brownie playing in other than a strictly blues setting, such as his appearances with Woody Guthrie.

Once Asch became more interested in long playing records in the early 1950s, much of McGhee's output appeared on this format. Sometimes he appeared as a co-leader with Sonny Terry or in an informal format featuring another veteran, Big Bill Broonzy. Just before moving away from New York City in 1958 and early 1959, Brownie recorded three fine solo albums for Asch. Most of these are blues performances, many of them using very traditional themes. "Poor Boy," "Jelly Roll Blues," "Long Gone," or "Frog Cryin'." Shortly thereafter McGhee decided to resettle on the West Coast and never recorded for Folkways again.

Since moving to Oakland, McGhee has continued to perform, though not as much as they once he had to look after his children near by and the Bay Area has been home for most of the years in which his music has been performed the gentler climate, and his reputation as a highly-respected senior American bluesman is sufficient that he can do all of the television work, touring, and recording that he wants.

Selected Bibliography


Selected Discography


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Folkways 3157. Brownie McGhee Sings the Blues

Folkways 32028. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Get On Board

Savoy 1204 Jumpin' the Blues (Cass. LP).

Savoy 1205 Jumpin' the Blues (Cass. 45RPM).

Savoy 2069/10166. Jumpin' the Blues (Cass. 78RPM)

Note: While some of these records are not available, all of the Folkways titles may be ordered by mail (see box on page one).
Cholly Blues
Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar (Folkways 2421, 1959)
This is a highly original song which may stem from some true life event. The text of "Hanging Man's Blues" is more focused than most blues, for it revolves entirely around a criminal's trial, incarceration, and hanging. As a broadside ballad, lacking out information that would make the narrative more complete. In this respect it is less like Black American blues-bands such as John Henry that move from one dramatic incident to another.

Living with the Blues
Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica (Folkways 2432, July 11/12, 1959)
This is a standard piece in Brownie McGhee's repertoire. It is apparently written in the thirties, but McGhee recorded it in 1943. With the exception of some minor problems with the next-to-last stanza, this also features one of McGhee's slickest guitar arrangements, with some very fine double-time runs during the solos.

Just a Dream
Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar (possibly Wild "Big Chief" Ellis, piano previously unissued recording).
Brownie McGhee acknowledged that he learned this tune from "my friend, Big Bill Broonzy," who first recorded it in the mid-1940s. Obviously taken from a live radio broadcast or concert performance, this selection was found on an unmarked acetate in the Folkways Archive at the Smithsonian Institution. Unfortunately, the piano is under-recorded and McGhee occasionally turns away from the microphone, but otherwise the troubadour hardly detracts from this worthy, world-wide performance.

Pawtnosh Blues
Brownie McGhee, guitar and vocal (Folkways 2430, 1955)
Although they never cared much for one another, Blind Boy Fuller and Brownie McGhee sometimes worked together in North Carolina in the late 1930s. This song is Brownie's version of Fuller's "Three Ball Blues," which Fuller recorded shortly before his death in 1940. The reference to "three balls" will no doubt confuse younger readers who have never seen a pawnbroker's traditional trade sign that utilizes that motif. In this case McGhee is using an electric guitar, a technologically modern development that Moves Aash rarily allowed in his studies.

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12. Betty and Dupree
Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar (Folkways 2302, 1955).
This thoughtful ballad appears to be from black oral tradition and the references to "the Atlanta jail" suggest a Georgia setting. The song is probably an imitative version of the black custom of the Atlanta jewelry store in 1921 and was the last man to be hanged in Georgia. On September 1, 1922, "Dupree Blues," as it is sometimes called, was first recorded by a South Carolina from Greenville, Blind Willie Walker. The song's emotionality is heightened by Brownie's husky, restrained, vocals.

13. Long Gone
Brownie McGhee, gat and vocal (Folkways 2421, 1959).
This is one of a large number of African-American songs about prison breaks and escapes on the run. "Long Gone" is related to the cycle of songs "Long Gone from Bowling Green." This performance may owe some of its poetic power to the influence of the "best" poets, such as Alan Ginsberg, whom McGhee may have heard in Greenwich Village, New York. McGhee builds the entire song around lines such as "He's long gone...like a turkey through the corn" form which he constructs a tale of the desire for freedom.

14. Grieving Hearted Blues
Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar (Folkways 2421, 1959)
This is another 12-bar blues whose heartfelt performance moves many "floating" verses. McGhee's verses about loss and trains touch upon two of the most celebrated blues themes. His simple direct guitar work is especially noteworthy, and his formidable technique is particularly evident during the first guitar solo.

15. I'm Gonna Tell God How You Treat Me
Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar (Folkways 2307, 1957).
As the probably simple tune of Frank Duckworth, it is clearly comfortable with religious material. He recorded sacred songs as early as 1941. Although he stresses the blues as his principal musical interest, McGhee has continued to perform sacred songs in his stage programs. This song is also known as "I'm Gonna Cross the Jordan" and closes with an impressive single-string guitar embellishment.