

# **SONNY TERRY AND BROWNIE McGHEE**

**By  
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## **Sonny, Brownie and The Barber Band**

Before anything else is written I would like to thank Chris Barber, and I assume it was his idea, for allowing me to hear Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee in person. I am sure that I speak for just about everyone.

It is really quite fantastic, and one doesn't have to think back far to when the very idea would have been quite incomprehensible, that jazz enthusiasts in Britain are able to hear these minor giants of jazz (minor is not my word; it is one forced upon me by others who, unknowingly, are in charge of the labels). It is also a flattering indication of the European's appreciation of jazz that Sonny and Brownie, two uncompromising, honest-to-goodness blues-singers, are able to undertake a nationwide tour and be assured of packed, enthusiastic and generally well-informed houses. This sort of reception must be both unexpected and gratifying to men such as these, whose contributions to their own country's culture is largely overlooked at home.

Even if the packed houses are largely due to the popularity of the Barber band that is no reason to be discouraged. theirs is a deserved popularity and they are obviously willing to use it in order to give their followers a glimpse of, and themselves an opportunity to play along side, the men who started it all. With Sonny and Brownie the fans seemed to love it, in which case everyone should be happy.

## **Back Down The Road**

I remember quite clearly that time when I first heard "Fox Chase". About seven years ago it turned up among a pile of Biltmores from the States. I hadn't asked for it and I don't think I had even heard of Sonny Terry, then. At first I was a bit startled by that primitive, yowling, living harmonica (or was it voice? It was hard to tell where one stopped and the other started). Startled or not I was fascinated and Sonny's records began to appear on my want lists. I recall reading, probably in the "Record Changer", that Sonny Terry was "faster on the draw with that harmonica than any sheriff Tombstone ever had"—and:, suspecting trickery, we spent many a record session listening for the harmonica fill-ins to overlap the vocals. They never did.

Brownie I first discovered on the Dan Burley Skiffle album, recorded by Rudi Blesh and later on a beat-up Savoy 78. It is over five years since I heard the Savoy but the lyrics are with me yet:

"I was walkin' down the street this mornin'. Full of my good gin—Lady standin' in a doorway says, 'Won't you come on in?'"

She said she'd beat my carpet, And dust ma furniture down, Then she'd bake me a jellyroll That was nice an' brown—

But she fooled me, yeah she fooled me. Don't you know that woman fooled me, She was jivin' all the time!"

After that I lost Brownie; his records were hard to get and in those days I was much preoccupied with Jelly Roll Morton. Bessie Smith and no-Louis-later-than-1928 reissues.

In 1955 I sold my record collection and moved to Canada and it was in that country, in an isolated construction camp just below the Alaska Panhandle, that I next heard Sonny Terry. From Stinson, in New York. I received an LP of chain gang songs sung by Woody Guthrie, Alec Stewart and Sonny. The remarkable thing about that record, apart from a hilarious, unaccompanied "Lost John" by Woody, was some train-mocking, belting harmonica playing. I played it over and over on those long winter nights when there was little else to do but lie on your bed and calculate how much more money you needed to make New Orleans.

Some time later I made New Orleans and one afternoon I saw "Baby Doll" and, like many others. thought I was listening to Sonny on the soundtrack. Sonny has now assured me that he had nothing to do with it. Apparently Kazan had intended to use him but, as the film unit was on location in Mississippi, he utilised local talent; an indication that there is plenty of undiluted folk music left in the South, provided you know where to look. Which, ordinarily, would bring me to Fred Ramsey and Horace Sprott, but. . .

I purchased Sonny's Folkways LPs and considered myself a confirmed addict, with one reservation—there was. on record, a certain sameness, a lack of variety both rhythmic and melodic, in his playing and singing.

Since hearing him in the flesh I have dismissed that reservation. In fact I cannot find a reservation in me about either Brownie or Sonny; their music is sufficiently fundamental, sufficiently devoid of affectation, to be beyond reproach.

### **That Down-home Gutty**

At 10.45 one morning I knocked hesitantly on the door of the hotel room. A sleepy voice enquired who was that. It was me and Brownie said to come in. He and Sonny were still in bed. I sat down and, while Sonny dressed, Brownie and I talked. I had prepared a long list of questions but now I had the opportunity to ask them they seemed silly and irrelevant. I put the paper back in my pocket.

I didn't need it anyway, for Brownie is a friendly, affable man and in reply to a hesitant question he informed me that, apart from short absences for recording sessions, he first

left the South about 18 years ago for an engagement at the Village Vanguard, that nightclub in Greenwich Village that has given shelter to many and excellent folk-singer.

Brownie, as those of you who read your programmes will know' was born at Knoxville, Tennessee in 1914. His father played the guitar and the blues were an everyday occurrence for the McGhee children. But this son did not, at first, follow in father's footsteps and Brownie's first instrument was the piano. By the time he was ten he was playing regularly at the local Sanctified Church.

As the years drifted by the young Brownie became restless. Polio had left him with a pronounced limp and he sensed that the music was to be his life. That was the way he wanted it and before long he was on the road, playing the piano and singing his blues wherever and whenever he could.

It did not take him long to discover that the piano has it's limitations and is hardly the instrument for a wandering blues singer. "Fella can't carry a piano 'round on his back". So Brownie bought a guitar and for the next seven or eight years he travelled, "I played 'most anywhere—picnics, dives, minstrel shows even in buses and trains. Wherever I went I'd have my music with me—always had a tune. At night time, 'bout dusk, we'd sit on the front steps—call 'em stoops—an' we'd play and the people'd stop an' listen and sometimes I'd be walkin' 'round with 500 dollars in my pocket." He talked of the notorious company towns that appear in social protest songs from all over the U.S.A. "Used to play in the coal mining towns, company towns, and they'd pay you in scrip-money so you couldn't spend it anywhere else but at the company's own store . . . go on over to another mine and they wouldn't take that money. Why those days . . .

Brownie looked through the wall at the past and he might have sighed.

" . . . Give me a highway goin' someplace and I'd get there. Back home in my scrapbook I've got laundry tickets from towns all over the country—be in this town and you decide to leave—no time or no money to pick up your shirts, so off you go. Yeah, I guess I've got shirts 'n stuff in laundries all across the country. In those days I always wore a black hat. Liked to look real mean . . . so nobody try to steal off you, you understand ? I used to sleep in graveyards—ain't nobody try to rob a man sleepin' in a graveyard"

"My first record? That was "Me an' My Dog" for the Okeh label. Washboard Red, he was Blind Boy Fuller's washboard said to J. B. Lyons, the Okeh talent spotter that he'd heard a fella 'round here singin' the blues, sound' pretty good That was me."

Brownie reminisced and somehow the subject of electric guitars came up. He is not in favour of electric guitars. "Get those guys an' they're wailin' away but you hear nothin' but noise. Some of 'em hear a guy, maybe like Muddy, an' they think they're gonna play like that, but you've gotta know . . . 'bout the bottle neck . . . none of 'em nobody, plays that old, dull, down-home gutty. You've gotta get that tone an' you've gotta be able to hear the words. No point bein' a blues singer if nobody can hear what you're singin'."

The rich, mellow voice rambled on and I cursed the absence of a tape recorder. Here is one blues man who knows where he's at; who knows what he wants to do and who refuses to lower his standards. "So some guy is popular and you change your style in order to cash in and pretty soon he's nothin' and you're nothin'. I wouldn't change my style, ever. I've been playin' an' singin' the blues all my life and what comes out is Brownie McGhee."

I mentioned "A Face in the Crowd" and screen credits. Brownie laughed and shrugged. He had been paid well and he knew that someone, somewhere would notice the guitar playing and wonder. "No, I just played the guitar the lyrics were Tom's (Glazer). It took a lot of practice getting the timing right for that jail scene—had to get Andy makin' that down stroke at the right time."

He sang a few snatches from the record he made of the title song and went on to talk about his own tunes "Someday I've got to go back down south, 'way down there—not that I want to steal material but just to get that atmosphere, that feeling. I can't find anything much to write about in New York—you get up, get on a train, and you go home again. You got to know what you're singin' about." Sonny, by this time, was dressed and announced his intention to go and have some lunch. Just before he left he felt in his pocket, produced a tiny harmonica and blew a short familiar phrase. "You remember I was telling you about always having your music with you?" asked Brownie when he had gone. "Sonny never goes anywhere without a harmonica." I suppose the sheriffs of Tombstone felt the same way about their Colt 45s.

I asked if "Globe-trotter" McGhee was a real name or a pseudonym. Brownie laughed. "Globe-trotter", that's my brother. When we made those records he'd just come out of the army. 'I've been around, man, let's call me Globe-trotter.' And we did."

"My brother has a big hit back in the States, on Atlantic, called "Drinkin' Wine, Shoo-bee-oo-bee". This time he's called 'Sticks McGhee and His Buddies'. That's my brothers tune."

I remembered the tune. It was very popular on Bourbon street where a trio called the Playboys did it regular justice. It is a good tune in the right hands and the pianist with the Playboys had the right hands and a voice that might have belonged to any number of fine blues singers.

Brownie mentioned the fact that he'd always wanted to go to New Orleans. But it is no longer a case of packing a bag and hitting the highways, for today he is a married man and has three children of whom he is very proud. "Can't go wanderin' now—the only reason I've been able to get around at all lately is because I was on the road with the show."

The show—"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" —proved to be something of a milestone in Brownie's career. It gave him the opportunity to work regularly and with Sonny and it introduced him to a new audience. This lead in turn to more work —from "A Face in the

Crowd" to folk and jazz concerts and nightclub engagements. For once we find a small measure of justice being done and a worthy artist gains some recognition.

It was a long walk from Knoxville, via Broadway to the Royal Festival Hall but Brownie McGhee made it, and he brought his music and his guitar with him.

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Sonny too was born in the heart of the blues country, near Durham, North Carolina on October 24, 1911. His father was a farmer who owned his own house and land where he grew tobacco, cotton and corn. Sonny's early days were carefree, untrammelled days spent working hard on the farm. hunting possum, shooting crows, buzzards and ducks, going to school and, fortunately, learning from his father the mechanics of the harmonica. "I been playin' harmonica ever since I wuz big enough to know what one was—I reckon 'bout five, six years. I just learned a little from him, from the rest on up. just tuk it up myself. Mockin' the trains 'bout the first piece I learn.... I used to hear the freight comin' by and I used to be sittin' down some time by mysel'9 rea. still an' I'd say I wish I could "lay like that."

He was eleven when the bad breaks began and his sight was impaired. "I hit my own self in the left eye, playin' with a piece o' stock. I hittin' on the chair, piece flew at me. Then, five years later, when I's sixteen, a little boy 'bout four years o.ld hit me in my other, that is right eye. We were playin' an' he throwed a piece o' iron, an hit me in the eye. I losed that complete. I had to quit school, I couldn't see to read."

The year was 1927 and young Saunders Terry, who had liked school, who had planned to have his own farm. found himself almost completely blind. The depression was looming and the music was all he had....

"After I got handicapped, I used to go to town.... I used to play on the streets and make money. I din't even carry a stick or nothin'. I done go out, an' stay out at night twelve, one o'clock . . . an' come home. Oh, jus wa]kin'.... Stay on the road. Them cussed roads! Sometimes ten, 'leven miles at night walkin'. I hear a car comin', I git out the road. Sometime I fall in the ditch, get up, keep a-goin'."

And Sonny kept a-goin', but to make a living he had to take a job at a factory in Durham. "I used to job around in muh spare time, playin' in the street an' at house parties. Had a gal name of Dora—Dora Martin—played guitar an' we'd sing th' blues. I was livin' with muh brother at the time."

But word got around that there was a pretty good harmonica player in Durham, and Blind Boy Fuller, a very popular guitar player and blues singer, came to jisten. He liked what he heard and asked Sonny to join him—"That was 'bout '35. noooo. '34, ah guess. Yeah we were in Burlington, Burlington N'oth Catlina, we were fixin' to leave for Chicago when Red, that's Washboard Red, our washboard. bought Brownie around That was the firs' time I met Brownie. Yeah, saw him diffrent times but we didn't start playin' together

'til I came to New York. He had § little combo goin' there, you know, washboard, tub, harmonica an' we started playin' together. That was after Blind Boy died, 'bout 1940, that I came to New York."

Sonny considers his appearance in the Broadway show "Finian's Rainbow" as his first big break. "Earl Robinson, a friend o' mine, was out in Calffornia workin' on "Rainbow" with the fella who wrote it and there was a piece there for piano. Earl said harmonica 'd be better but the fella say he din't know any harmonica players. Earl suggested me."

The harmonica part was included and Sonny was in. The show ran for two and a half years on Broadway and spent a further ten months on the road. The year was 1950 and Sonny returned to New York where, not surprisingly, he and Brownie were cast by Kazan for small parts in Tennessee William's saga of a not-so-gallant South, "Cat On a Hot Tin Roof". What better way to evoke the atmosphere of long, hot nights in the Deep South than to turn those two loose for a few seconds ? They stayed with "Cat" for three years. They were much in demand for concerts and Sonny recorded for Capitol Decca, Electra and recently he and Brownie did a twelve-inch long-play for Folkways. Then there w" the offer of an overseas tour and Sonny and Brownie packed their trunks and headed for England.

The day before they were due to join the Barber hand in Germany I dropped by the hotel to ask Sonny a few final questions. As I walked along the corridor I heard the harmonica and I paused for a second before knocking and listened to the beat blues being played in that stifling British hotel on a hot afternoon in May. It's moments like that that you remember later on.

We sat around for a while and I asked and Sonny answered my questions and we talked of the bus strike, rents in New York and the advantages of raising Brownie's kids in the country. As I stood up to leave Otilie was singing a blues on the radio. "That's Tampa Red's tune," said Sonny.

Nowadays when we have categories even for blue singers, it would be expected that Brownie and Sonny, coming as they do from the rural south, could be neatly labelled and dropped into the "Country" pigeon-hole. It is hard to say. In my opinion their 18 year spell in an urban atmosphere has added to, rather than detracted from, those elusive qualities peculiar to the blues from below the Mason-Dixon line. Perhaps there is a slight sophistication, mainly of material (vide Brownie's remarks about someday returning to the South) but their music suggests Leadbelly and Tommy McLennan rather than T-Bone and Josh.

But I cannot consider that stuff as being very important—country, urban, fast, slow, accompanied, unaccompanied 8-bar, 12-bar, any-number-of-bars-from-one-chorus-to-the-next—the differences are of form rather than content. There is one fact that nobody can argue with: to hear Sonny and Brownie sing and play blues is to hear the blues sung and played by two of the men who gave the word its meaning.

## At The Festival Hall

The concerts, like most things, started at the beginning and the first half of each concert was played by the Chris Barber band. Earlier, Brownie had summed up the band thus: 'They've got a good, big sound and they don't crowd one another—no one man tryin' to steal the show.' I am inclined to agree with him.

It seems to be fashionable for the critics, when commenting on performances by local bands, to give free rein to their more destructive critical talents. When it is occasionally suggested that they are being a little harsh they inevitably claim that the home-product must be judged by world standards etc., etc. and the cry goes out—"lack of originality", "stodgy rhythm section", "mechanical", 'copy, copy, copy'.

They are not always wrong, these critics, but when they write disparagingly about a band as good as the Barber band then I am at a loss (this feeling also applies in relation to Ken Colyer and others who have chosen to play in a certain idiom—but that would have to be another article).

Copying, for instance. I always think thus: Doesn't Louis, the supreme stylist, openly admit that in the early days he copied Oliver and Bunk? And what of the more than superficial debt owed to Louis by those much-beloved-of-the-critics trumpet players Clayton, Eldridge, Berry, Jordan, Coleman, Shavers and Allen? I cannot see that there is any more Kid Howard (or George Mitchell—who knows?) in the playing of Pat Halcox than there is Louis in the playing of Humph (who usually receives a few kind words).

In the beginning everyone copies too much. This was probably as true for Bechet, Muggsy and Miff Mole as it was for Ken Colyer Chris Barber or Monty Sunshine. But, given time, there inevitably emerges an individual style and in the music that the Barber band played on May the 3rd I could find no grounds for accusing them of lack of originality.

The band has a big tone and managed, uncannily, to fill the Festival Hall with music. Their presentation was relaxed and could, if you were faultfinding, be interpreted as cold and indifferent. I merely found it relaxed. Many of the tunes were new, "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair", and "Blue Bells Goodbye" for instance; the ensembles were freewheeling affairs the solos were hot and swinging; and the rhythm section not even a bit stodgy.

Pat Halcox sounds better all the time and probably his best attribute is that he leads without dominating. Monty Sunshine, who reminds me of Fazola, Bechet and Lewis simultaneously, is still the best clarinet I've heard since Lewis was at the Stroll. Chris Barber, without forgetting the tried and true tailgate phrases, seems to have added much that is his own and he never gets in the way of the trumpet. It is a front line that is remembered as a whole rather than as, a trio of individuals fighting on the footpath. In fact it is this quality of wholeness or oneness that leads me to believe that this band has succeeded in capturing the very essence of the New Orleans style.

Ottolie Patterson has the hardest job of all and, considering what she's up against, does remarkably well. On the fast and medium tempo numbers she swings wonderfully but really what makes me feel uncomfortable is the fact that the lyrics of many American folksongs lose their meaning when sung by an Irish girl in London. (As much as I like the singing of Lonnie Donegan I always have a feeling of unreality when he sings "Grand Coulee Dam".) We may utilise the blues as a means of self expression, but I do feel that we should, where possible, modify the lyrics so that they take on some real meaning for both artist and audience.

After a short interval Chris introduced Sonny and Brownie and suddenly there was "Midnight Special" as it must have been on thousands of lonely nights in Houston. The good crowd were silent as Sonny's foot stomped and his cupped hands fanned incredible music from the tiny harmonica. Brownie's head was back and the familiar words came singing out, new and fresh and real at last and underneath it all was the type of guitar you'd been listening to for years on beat-up, hard-to-get records. Into the Festival Hall came swirling the mist from the bayou and the Spanish moss was eerie on the trees in the morning sun. The nights were warm and you sat on the porch drinking corn and listening to the hounds howl after fox or possum and an old man said, "Where's 'at old Stumpv at now son, where's he at?" And you said, "'Way over in th' bottom uncle, 'way down in the bottom". And always, accenting loneliness, came the low, far-off cry of the freight-train plaintive, stirring.

The blues from the deep south were back in London. They had arrived via Broadway, New York and a thousand whistle-stops along the way. They had brought them, Sonny and Brownie— Sonny standing quietly feeling tentatively for the microphone, blowing a soft, low note as Brownie announced the next number. The harmonica became a voice and together they explained the anguish of departure with "Howlong Blues".

One after the other the tunes came— blues, work-songs, prison-songs ("If I c'n make it—June, July, August . . . I'm comin' home. Lord, Lord, comin' home.") and more blues. They sang duets on "I'm Climbin' on Top of the World", "John Henry", "Southern Train", "Cornbread, Peas, Black Molasses". Brownie followed "Howlong" with "Pawnshop Blues", "Sportin' Life" and "Me an' my Dog" and Sonny sang "Custard Pie Blues", "Hooray! Hooray! This woman is killin' me", "My Baby done change the Lock" and played "Hootin' Blues", "Momma Blues" and at the first concert only, "Fox Chase".

The music was monumental—solid from top to bottom and no frills needed to cover structural weakness. It was, if you like, simple and primitive and if you like or not it was quite magnificent.

The stage presentation of these two men was to my mind flawless. For nearly an hour they held a huge audience and, at the end, had them screaming for more. They accomplished this without resorting to "funny" routines, without the abject and embarrassing "you are the greatest audience in the world" sort of stuff and there was no ballyhoo about every number being "a request for a very great friend of mine." The

cynical approach has lessened my enjoyment of more than one recent jazz concert. There was no ballyhoo and no mike-hogging....

"We would now like to play a number that we had the honour of playing every night for three years in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" And away they' d go on "John Henry" ,—the wildest, whoop'nest "John Henry" I've ever heard with Sonny's big voice relishing every lyrical phrase and underneath, the McGhee guitar, driving, emphasising, commenting.

There is not much more one can say. It is difficult to describe the feelings aroused without resorting to what Hemingway called 'the worst sort of flowery writing". If I am writing for the people who were there then it should not be necessary; if I am writing for those who could not be there then, if I am to convey anything at all, it can be excused and I hope it will be.

Concerts begin and, unlike parties, concerts end and all too soon the band returned to join Sonny and Brownie for the last number. The crowd roared for "Fox Chase" (See? I knew they were "generally well-informed") and Sonny smiled proudly as Chris announced that there just wasn't time, please. There's not much you can do about an announcement like that but accept it. So we went home

As I write this Brownie and Sonny are on their way to what I am sure will be fresh triumphs in Germany. They were worried that they might have language difficulties but, as I tried to assure them you don't have to be able to play the trumpet to appreciate Louis Armstrong.

They are fine people and they make fine music. I sincerely hope we'll be seeing more of them.

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