A black and white photograph of a man, likely a blues musician, playing an acoustic guitar. He is looking slightly to the right with a thoughtful expression. He is wearing a dark, button-down shirt with a collar. The background is dark and out of focus.

Legends of Country Blues Guitar

Volume One

featuring
Son House
Josh White
● Rev. Gary Davis
Big Bill Broonzy
Mance Lipscomb
Henry Townsend
Brownie McGhee
Mississippi John Hurt
Robert Pete Williams
Bonus: John Jeremy's
award winning film:
Blues Like Showers Of Rain

Photo courtesy Folklore Productions

Rev. Gary Davis



As a genre, blues music was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century by rural black musicians. They shaped it with brilliant inspiration from disparate elements of black song. Blues seemed to have risen with the popularity and adoption of the guitar as the standard instrument for entertainment at this time. By World War I, blues had begun to assume a standard form, aided by vaudeville shows, traveling musicians and even Tin Pan Alley. By the early '20's, recorded urban performers solidified the standard three-verse, 12 bar meter structure that has identified most blues. Fortunately, during that same period, there were

recorded musicians who grew up with the blues and whose guitar-styles were more fluid and improvisational. They played with a personal adaptation of their regional style, shaping blues and related material to their own needs and those of their audience.

The music they played was alien to formula, possessing such skill and robustness as to be captivating. Their fame was local, tied intimately to their time and place, and only the providence of a chance encounter with a talent scout or record company preserved their art. Even then, it seemed fated that they would remain flamboyant names on exotic record labels.

The blues revival of the early '60's brought many of these survivors to the forefront of traditional music. The technique of a Rev. Davis, the power of a Son House, the charm of a Mississippi John Hurt suddenly leaped into sight, becoming more tangible, more awesome and more human. The rare footage presented in this video from that period, is a treasure beyond imagining, drawn from a myriad of sources, depicting some of the greatest blues musicians who ever lived.

REV. GARY DAVIS was one of the greatest and most accomplished guitarists of the twentieth century. His impassioned singing and playing of religious and secular music was of virtuoso quality. Born in 1896 in Laurens Co., South Carolina, he suffered from partial (and later total) blindness as an infant. Davis began playing music at an early age, mastering harmonica, banjo and guitar by the time he was a young man. Around



Photo by Stefan Grossman

World War I, he began playing in a local string band and became associated with legendary guitarist Willie Walker, of Greenville, S.C. Moving to Durham, North Carolina, in the late '20's, he became acquainted with Sonny Terry and through him, Blind Boy Fuller (to whom Davis gave some pointers). His religious fervor caused him to disdain secular music, although he recorded two blues out of twelve selections during his initial recording session in 1935. Disagreement about money and his treatment from the talent scout curtailed Davis' recording career for a decade. He moved to New York around 1941 to join his wife and played on the streets of Harlem. An album recorded in the late 1950's brought him some recognition and further recordings which eventually led to his appearing at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964. He became an inspiration and teacher to a legion of young guitarists in the New York area before his death in 1972. His technical prowess was nearly unmatched among rural bluesmen of his generation and the speed and accuracy of his playing remains awesome.

Blues and Ragtime (Shanachie CD 97024)

Complete Early Recordings (Yazoo CD 2011)

Pure Religion and Bad Company (Folkways CD 40035)

Say No to the Devil (Original Blues Classics CD 519)

Gospel, Blues and Street Songs (Original Blues Classics CD 524)

HENRY TOWNSEND is one of St. Louis' foremost blues musicians. He moved from his birthplace in Shelby, Ms. (1909) as an infant, to Cairo, Illinois. In the late 1920's, before he was out of his teens, he moved to St. Louis and quickly learned guitar and piano from local luminaries such as Henry Spaulding and Lonnie Johnson. He played with St. Louis pianist, Walter Davis, that lasted until the latter's death, and recorded with Roosevelt Sykes, Big Joe Williams and others in the 1930's. Townsend played in



Photo by Ron Edwards

a number of styles, from rather free-form compositions in open tuning (vestapol: D A D F# A D) to sharply snapped single-string runs in normal tuning. The latter reflecting his tutelage and long association with Henry Spaulding, whose Cairo Blues he faithfully renders on this video. The middle 1950's found the St. Louis blues scene moribund and he worked as an insurance salesman. Rediscovered by Sam Charters in the late 1950's, he gradually resumed performing, occasionally recording. He is still active today and has finally received recognition for his singular style.

St. Louis Town (Yazoo CD1003)

St. Louis Country Blues 1929-1937 (Document 5147)

MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT's warm and appealing singing and playing is atypical of the hard blues generally associated with his native state. His music reflected a style that exemplifies black music before World War I. He was born on the edge of the delta in Teoc, Mississippi in 1892, Hurt learned his craft in the early 1900's, absorbing the area's dance tunes, ballads, traditional songs and prototype- blues. A farmer all of his life, he played local parties and occasional square dances. Until his rediscovery, he rarely left his community and his style remained unaffected by change. In 1928, a white country fiddler (W.R. Narmour) recommended Hurt to a talent

Photo by Tom Hoskins



scout for Okeh records, who arranged sessions for him in Memphis and New York. He recorded twelve songs that sold moderately well, including a song about Avalon, his home town, which enabled researchers to find him 35 years later. While Hurt remained unknown outside of his community, his reputation was made when two of his songs were included in the

Harry Smith's collection on Folkways Records - Treasury of Folk Music. Hurt's rediscovery and appearance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963 was one of the high points of the blues revival. His tight and rolling finger-picking style influenced many young folk guitarists and the charm and dignity of the man is readily apparent in his music. He recorded and played extensively until his death in 1966.

Mississippi John Hurt, 1928 (Yazoo CD 1065)

Avalon Blues (Rounder CD 1081)

Worried Blues (Rounder CD 1082)

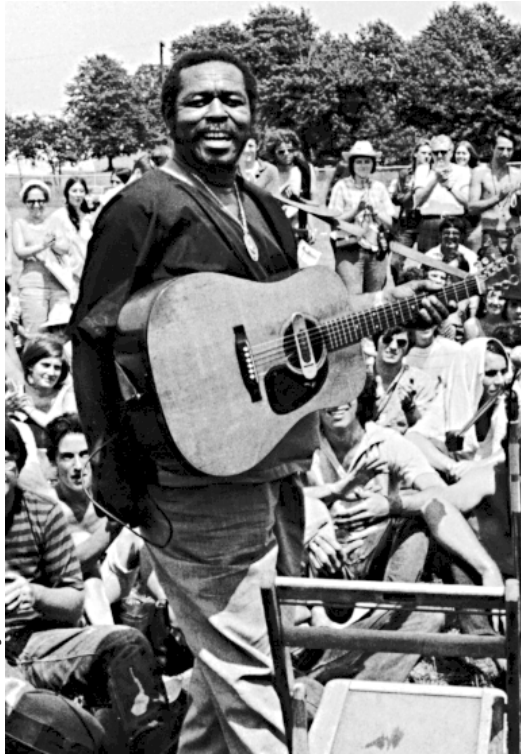
The Best of Mississippi John Hurt (Vanguard CD 19/20)

Mississippi John Hurt Today! (Vanguard CD 79220)

The Immortal Mississippi John Hurt Vanguard CD 79248)

Last Sessions (Vanguard CD 79327)

BROWNIE McGHEE was a stalwart ambassador of the blues for over half a century. Walter "Brownie" McGhee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1915. Afflicted with polio at the age of four, he learned guitar from his father at an early age. Moving to Maryville, Tennessee, he attended high school, dropping out in the late '20's to hobo and work in carnivals, minstrel shows and dances. He returned in the early '30's to complete school, join a gospel quartet and play guitar in the streets. In the middle '30's, he resumed traveling, attempting to make a living through his music. He encountered Sonny



Terry in North Carolina c. 1939 which led to a recording date the next year. His style was somewhat gentler and less raggy than North Carolina guitarists, and an attempt to market him as "Blind Boy Fuller No. 2" after the latter's death was not particularly successful although his records sold well. In 1940 he moved to New York and continued his association with Sonny Terry that was to last decades. Sonny and Brownie worked with various musicians in New

York such as Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie, and becoming a mainstay for Folkways records. For over twenty years, Brownie had a dual career as a folk singer for a white audience while performing and recording solo and with groups for a black audience. He has appeared on Broadway, TV and the movies. A more versatile and practised musician than often credited, he recorded innumerable records in a variety of styles.

The Folkway Years 1945-49 (Folkways CD 40034)

Brownie's Blues (Original Blues Classics CD 505)

Brownie McGhee 1944-1945 (Travelin' Man CD 04)

ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS did not start to play guitar until he was almost twenty. He developed a unique, "stream of consciousness" style of singing and playing. Unlike most blues musicians, he rarely bothered to rhyme his words or have a recognizable bar structure, seemingly intent on communicating his experience in the most direct, idiosyncratic manner. Born in Zachary, Louisiana, in



1914, his family moved to Scotlandville, Louisiana, while he was in his teens. A local musician, Lacey Collins, influenced him and he supplemented his income as a farm worker by playing local dances and country suppers. An altercation led him to spend four years in Angola Prison for murder. While in prison, he re-corded for Folk-Lyric records which aided him in gaining parole. He appeared at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963 and toured extensively as well as recording. He died in 1980.

The Legacy Of The Blues Vol.9 (Sonet CD649)

Photo by David Gahr



JOSH WHITE embarked upon his career in music at a very early age. He was born in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1915. His father was a preacher for the Church of God in Christ and the young Josh sang in the choir. Before he was ten, he was working as a guide for blind street singers such as Willie Walker and John Henry Arnold, from whom he learned guitar. He left school at the age of fourteen to travel as a guide and accompanist to Blind Joe Taggart and made his first records with that artist in 1928. By 1932 he

had become an accomplished musician and was recording as a solo musician. Due to the extremely religious nature of his family, he generally recorded spirituals under his own name and blues as "Pinewood Tom". By 1936, he had gravitated to New York, became involved in Cafe Society and adopted a more polished and commercial approach to his singer and playing. He became active in what were then radical causes, and entertained President Franklin D. Roosevelt at White House concerts. He was one of the first rural musicians to purposely market himself as a folk musician and

became well-known as such in the early '50's. He toured and recorded extensively throughout his career and although his material changed, his guitar playing never lost its suppleness. He died in 1969.

Mama Let Me Lay It On You (Yazoo CD 1040)

BIG BILL BROONZY is among the most famous figures in country blues. He maintained a sterling career for over 30 years. Born circa 1898 in Scott, Mississippi, he was raised in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. There he learned to play violin from an uncle and worked as a country fiddler at local parties. Moving to Chicago in 1920, he began to play



Photo by Jean Delfre

guitar and made his first recordings for Paramount in 1927. By the early 1930's he had become an accomplished player of blues and rags, and one of the most famous blues musicians in Chicago. Broonzy had the ability to adapt with the times and as the rural sound began to lose favor he became more urban-sounding, recording with piano and bass, small combos and brass. Few musicians of the era were more popular not only with their audience, but also with peers; Broonzy was noted to be helpful to fellow musicians who were settling in Chicago throughout the thirties and forties. In 1938, he appeared at Carnegie Hall for the "Spiritual to Swing" concert and was introduced (and portrayed himself) as a sharecropper. In the early '50's, he gained new popularity in England and Europe as a folk artist, working club dates and concerts. Lung cancer cut short his career and he died in 1958.

The Young Bill Broonzy 1926-1935 (Yazoo CD 1011)

Do That Guitar Rag (Yazoo CD 1035)

Sings Folk Songs (Folkways CD 40023)

The Complete Recordings (Document 5050/5051/5052...)

SON HOUSE: Legendary is scarcely apt to describe Eddie "Son" House, the prime influence on Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, themselves archetypal figures of Mississippi blues. His rich and powerful singing and bottleneck playing are benchmarks of Delta blues. Born in Lyon, Mississippi around 1902, he grew up in a religious household and had ambitions to be a preacher. He was contemptuous of blues until the bottleneck playing of Delta musicians Willie Wilson and Rube Lacy captivated him, and



Photo courtesy Yazoo Records

led him to take up guitar. Three years later, in 1930, he ran up upon the fabled Charlie Patton, who invited him to record at what was later felt to be one of the pinnacle sessions of country blues for Paramount Records. Afterwards, he maintained a friendship with Patton disciple, Willie Brown, for over twenty years, vacillating between a religious life and a blues career. He made a number of recordings for the Library of Congress, which added luster to his reputation before he was rediscovered. Unconcerned with music for over a decade, he was located by Nick Perls, Dick Waterman and Bill Barth, and persuaded to return to playing. His subsequent performances such as I Had A Woman in Hughes (with Jerry Ricks on second guitar recorded for Camera Three that was aired on commercial television), fully captured the intense, driving spirit that House commanded on his earlier recordings. With his death in 1988, a profound chapter in Mississippi blues was closed.

*Delta Blues/The Original Library Of Congress Session
1941-1942 (Biograph CD 118)*

*Father Of The Delta Blues/The Complete 1965 Sessions
(Columbia/Legacy 48867)*

Masters Of The Delta Blues (Yazoo CD 2002)

Son House & Bukka White (Yazoo Video 500)

Photo by Tom Copi



MANCE LIPSCOMB's playing featured nearly every facet of early black music as played in Texas. He was one of the benchmarks of the early '60's blues revival. Born in Navasota, Texas, in 1895, Mance began to accompany his father, a local musician, from the age of eleven. His father deserted the home when Mance was sixteen, leaving him the sole support of his family. For close to 50 years he regularly played Saturday night dances in his community, supplementing his in-

come as a farmer, and honing his skills as a guitarist. By learning from a number of musicians who passed through Navasota, Mance became a virtual repository of Texas blues, ballads, rags and dance tunes from the early years of this century. With his broad range of black musical styles and effortless playing in the Texas style, he was a great favorite on the folk and blues circuit until his death in 1976.

Texas Songster (Arhoolie CD 306)

You Got To Reap What You Sow (Arhoolie CD 398)

Notes by Don Kent

RECORDING INFORMATION:

MANCE LIPSCOMB: Silver City & Angel Child (KLRU-TV, 1972)

MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT: Spike Driver Blues & You're Going To Walk That Lonesome Valley (Pete Seeger's Rainbow Quest, 1966)

HENRY TOWNSEND: Cairo Blues (Legacy Productions, circa 1986)

SON HOUSE: Death Letter Blues (Camera Three circa 1965),
I Had A Woman in Hughes (BBC, 1972)

REVEREND GARY DAVIS: Children of Zion (Pete Seeger's Rainbow Quest, 1966), Death Don't Have No Mercy (Lionel Rogosin's Black Roots, 1970)

BIG BILL BROONZY: Worried Man Blues, Barrelhouse Rag, How You Want It Done, John Henry, Blues in E (circa 1950s)

ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS: Mamie

(Univ. Of Washington Ethnomusicology Archives, 1968)

BROWNIE MCGHEE: Don't Kid Me (Pete Seeger's Rainbow Quest, 1966)

JOSH WHITE: Jelly Jelly (1965)



Brownie & Sticks McGhee
(Photo courtesy of Stefan Grossman)

Vestapol 13003



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 1. Silver City
 MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT
 2. Spike Driver
 HENRY TOWNSEND
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 7. Hey, Hey
 8. How You Want It Done
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 13. Jelly Jelly
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 14. I Had A Woman in Hughes
 MANCE LIPSCOMB
 15. Angel Child
 MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT
 16. You're Going To Walk That
 Lonesome Valley Blues
 REV. GARY DAVIS
 17. Death Don't Have No Mercy
 BONUS: JOHN JEREMY'S FILM
 18. Blues Like Showers of Rain

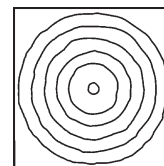
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Front Photo of Big Bill Broonzy © 1956 Jean Delire
 Back Photo of Miss. John Hurt by George Pickow
 Back Photo of Son House by Nick Perls
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