A black and white photograph of Son House, an elderly African American man, wearing a fedora and a suit, playing a resonator guitar. He is looking down at the instrument with a focused expression. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**Legends of the  
Delta  
Blues**

featuring  
**Son House  
John Lee Hooker  
Johnny Shines  
Bukka White**

# Legends of the Delta Blues

by Mark Humphrey



Photo by Axel Kustner

There was an intensity about them which was both frightening and beautiful. Their music, more than mere entertainment, seemed at times a wrenching experience of self-exorcism. Some of these men, subject of wild speculation or rumored dead, sprang to life seemingly from the underworld, certainly from a time and place not our own. The reality of their presence was awesome enough, yet they carried, too, a thick aura of spectral presences, of departed legends they were touched by (or themselves touched). For Son House, the associations went deep into both the past and the future of the blues. He was a companion of Charley Patton and Willie Brown, a mentor to Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. For Johnny Shines, his unshakable ghost was Robert Johnson, whose music he would bring to Chicago. Bukka White idolized Charley Patton; John Lee Hooker was free of legendary associations to color our sense of him, unless the distant (yet discernible) echoes of the African griots present in his music count.

These men's legends, when all else is said and done, are etched from their music's urgency and

power. And some of that power is undoubtedly that of First Cause: “A number of facts suggest that the blues may first have taken shape in Mississippi,” writes Samuel Charters in Lawrence Cohn’s *Nothing But the Blues*. “In the northwest counties of Mississippi, the famous Delta cotton country, the concentration of African American communities was so dense that the musical life preserved elements of African melody and instrumental style that had all but died out elsewhere in the South... Somewhere, probably in a Delta cabin, a singer who knew the melodies and the improvised verses of Mississippi work songs decided to sing the in a new way, and that was the blues.”

Awestruck by this primal music, some of its ardent admirers perceive in it something other than rebuilt work songs and whiskey bravado. They sense a spiritual dimension. “This intersection in the Delta of heaven and earth, good and evil, the temporal and the eternal at their extreme limits...is life underneath a real, existent Cross and this is what makes this music and this land so eerie,” writes John Fahey. “The great value of the Delta blues is that the people who recorded them lived vivid, exciting, anguished lives filled with a deeper penetration of reality...they were people who once were in close touch with essences and not appearances.”



Photo courtesy of The Library Of Congress

## **Son House**

### **(1902-1988)**

*“Blues—they won’t do to fool with. Make you wish you was dead sometimes.” – Son House*

No one would seem to better fit Fahey’s description of the Delta bluesman than Son House. A ‘backslid’ preacher, House felt an intense ambivalence towards the music he seemingly embodied, the blues. His mixed emotions come through in the 1972 monologue drawn from private footage which opens this video. There is something wonderful about seeing one of the Delta’s primordial figures recall his first exposure to the blues, and his bewilderment: “What the devil is that—blues?”

On another occasion, House offered a rather different explanation: “People keep asking me where the blues started, and all I can say is that when I was a boy we always was singing in the fields. Not real singing, you know, just hollering but we made up our songs about things that was happening to us at that time, and I think that’s where the blues started.”

Eddie James House, Jr. was raised on a plantation between Clarksdale and Lyon, Mississippi. He was preaching by age fifteen, and his ‘reverse conversion’ to the blues doesn’t seem to have occurred until House was in his early twenties. A 1928 shooting at a house party resulted in House serving a little over a year at Parchman Farm on manslaughter charges. After his release he met bluesmen Charley Patton and Willie Brown in Lula. Patton recommended House to Paramount label talent scout A.C. Laibly, who arranged for House to record on May 28, 1930 in Grafton, Wisconsin. The seven surviving recordings from House’s sole pre-War commercial recording session are deemed masterpieces of Delta blues.

Following his return from Wisconsin, House settled in guitarist-singer Willie Brown’s hometown of Robinsonville, Mississippi. His musical partnership with Brown flourished in the 1930s and 1940s, when



House's prowess as blues singer and guitarist made him a role model for such young men as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. "It was Son House who influenced me to play," Waters told Peter Guralnick. "I was really behind Son House all the way." (Ironically, House outlived both of his star pupils.)

In the summer of 1941, folklorist Alan Lomax was looking for Johnson when he found House instead (at Muddy Waters' direction). During that and the following summer Lomax recorded House solo and with a band featuring Brown, Fiddling Joe Martin on mandolin and Leroy Williams on harmonica. These legendary Library of Congress recordings, which included the prototype of "Levee Camp Moan," originally entitled "Government Fleet Blues" and heard here in a 1968 University of Washington performance, would be House's last until after his 'rediscovery' in 1964. He abandoned blues playing after Willie Brown's 1953 death, a decade after House had himself moved to Rochester, New York. His stint as Pullman porter there may in part have inspired "Empire State Express," one of the staples of House's repertoire during the decade (1964-1974) he was again actively performing. Along with blues, the 'backslid' preacher always included a spiritual in his performances, albeit often a rather secular one with the 'bluesy' cautionary tone of "Don't Mind People Grinning in Your Face."

## **Johnny Shines**

### **(1915-1992)**

September 5, 1941 was a date Johnny Shines never forgot: it was the day he moved to Chicago. Fittingly, the first of his songs in this video is “Sweet Home Chicago,” a song first recorded in 1936 by Shines’s friend Robert Johnson. Shines was among that generation which brought the Delta blues to the Windy City, where the Midwestern urban environment transformed it into the hard amplified poetry of post-War Chicago blues. The second song we hear from Shines, “Kindhearted Woman,” was another Johnson standard which Muddy Waters, who arrived in Chicago a couple of years after Shines, recorded at the outset of his career in 1948.

A patient but proud man, Shines honored countless requests for Johnson’s songs in the last twenty-five years of his life from young white admirers who knew him best as “Robert Johnson’s traveling companion.” Certainly the time Shines spent with Johnson in his twenties was formative, musically and personally. Yet there was too often an inclination to reduce Shines to little more than a living reflection of the man many considered the greatest recorded Delta bluesman. Shines, however, was more than a Robert Johnson knockoff.

John Ned Lee Shines, Jr. was born in Frayser, Tennessee and moved to Memphis when he was six. He learned his first music from a guitar-playing brother, who showed him such Delta standards as “Rolling and Tumbling.” At seventeen he had become adept enough in both standard and Spanish (open G) tunings to steal the thunder of Howlin’ Wolf at a country dance. During Wolf’s break Shines commandeered his guitar: “When Wolf came back I had the joint rocking,” he told Pete Welding (Living Blues # 22). It was the beginning of a rivalry which lasted several years in the Delta and which earned Shines the nickname Little Wolf.



Photo by Tom Copi

"I've pretty well always kept me a day job," Shines recalled, and it was as cattle driver at a Memphis packing house that he earned enough money to buy his first guitar: "A little black Regal guitar...it cost \$6 and something." He then began to scrutinize many of Memphis' best bluesmen: "To learn from these fellows you had to watch and listen," Shines told Welding. "After I had got the guitar I would say it took me about eight months before I was ready for hire." Returning to Arkansas, scene of his encounter with Howlin' Wolf, "I went as a professional," Shines proudly recalled. And it was with that assurance that he met Robert Johnson in Helena, Arkansas in 1934 or 1935.

"I couldn't handle a slide like he could and there were lots of things he did I was trying to learn," Shines recalled. Though Johnson was "kind of long-armed," he tolerated Shines' interest and eventually took him as a traveling companion. They entertained on farms and city streets, traveling from the Delta as far north as Windsor, Ontario. Johnson would sometimes leave Shines without word, only to reappear months later. Shines absorbed a great deal of Johnson's repertoire and brought it with him to Chicago in 1941.

The flood of migrants from the Delta to Chicago meant that Shines would eventually meet many old friends from home, including Robert Jr. Lockwood, David 'Honeyboy' Edwards, the second guitarist on "Love of Mine," and Walter 'Shakey' Horton, who Shines first met in 1930. "Harp playing seems to be a birthmark with Walter," Shines told Welding. "That's one of the reasons Walter's so hard to beat. It's something he was born to do..."

In 1946, Lester Melrose recorded Shines for Columbia, but the four sides weren't issued for decades. Meanwhile, Shines fronted a sextet called the Dukes of Swing, which used Lionel Hampton's "Flying Home" as a theme. Shines enjoyed jazz, but it was strictly blues when he made his sole appearance on Chess in October 1950 as 'Shoe Shine Johnny' in the company

of Little Walter and Jimmy Rogers. Two years later, his recordings for the small JOB label included one of the songs he plays in this video, “Ramblin’.” “Some of the songs I do now I wrote a long time ago,” Shines told Welding. “Like this song ‘Ramblin’.’ That’s something I created when I first began to play with the slide. I met this fellow Eli Green—I had already met Robert—and he played a tune almost like that. The people seemed to like it so well ‘till I begin to put my words between his music and Robert’s music.” While “Ramblin’” is indebted to Johnson’s 1936 recording of “Walking Blues,” that too, can be traced to Son House’s 1930 version. The blues evolved as an ongoing, impassioned dialogue.

Around 1958, however, Johnny Shines simply quit talking. Embittered over his lack of success, he hocked his equipment and vowed never to play again. It was not to be: his JOB recordings had become coveted by international blues collectors, two of whom arrived at his door from England in 1965 and arranged for him to record with his old friend Walter Horton for the Vanguard album. *Chicago: The Blues Today!* It marked the beginning of a comeback which took Shines to Europe in the company of Willie Dixon’s Chicago All Stars and produced some wonderful recordings (“I Don’t Know” was one of Shines’ later originals which he considered among his best work) by a man who maintained a rueful attitude towards the blues business even as he loved the music. Speaking of his acoustic Gibson B-25, Shines told Jas Obrecht: “I bought a home and fed eleven people and clothed them, just out of that little round hole there. That means a lot to me, that guitar does.”

## Bukka White

(1909-1977)



Photo by George Pickow

James Joyce would have loved Bukka White. Both the Irish novelist and the African-American bluesman were masters of the stream-of-consciousness narrative. Three rarely-seen examples of Bukka's unique artistry grace this video. Bukka tests his prowess as serenader against the resolve of his Catherine in "I'm Going Settle

Down" ("I always heard the people say that you could play somebody back if they was in love with you," he growls.) "Old Lady" is wry reverse ageism, while "Freight Train Blues" details the lure the rails held for Bukka, son of railroad fireman John White. "I got the trains from him," Bukka told Bruce Cook, "and I got the music from him, too."

Booker T. Washington White was born in Houston, Mississippi in the hill country west of the Delta. His boyhood ambition, he once recalled, was to "come to be a great man like Charley Patton," who Bukka credited with introducing him to both blues and booze. It was his father, however, himself a guitarist, who gave Bukka his first guitar for his ninth birthday. The guitar and the girls at the country dances gave him ideas, and by his early teens Bukka had embarked on the hoboing life-style he sings about in "Freight Train Blues." He rode the freights to St. Louis, where, Bukka recalled, "I put my boots on" as a blues singer. Ironically, his first record release in 1930 was labeled as the work of Washington White, 'The Singing

Preacher.’ “I Am in the Heavenly Way” and “Promise True and Grand” are the sole sacred works among Bukka’s remarkable body of pre-war blues.

Nicknamed ‘Barrelhouse’ in his youth, Bukka hoboed as far north as Buffalo, New York, but always came back to the Delta. “I couldn’t get the Delta out of my mind,” he told Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall (*Beale Street Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America’s Main Street*). “There was more money in the Delta than was in Chicago for me...I was just around there with them old musicians and we’d have a ball.” But violence skirmishes were as much a part of Delta life as the fish fries and country frolics Bukka loved. A shooting incident sent him to Parchman Farm, where John A. Lomax recorded him for the Library of Congress in 1939. After his release Bukka went to Chicago in March 1940 for what would be his most memorable recording session. Spurred by producer Lester Melrose’s demand for original material, Bukka unleashed a startlingly original torrent of autobiographical songs about prison, women, depression, trains and death. “Fixin’ to Die Blues” would be construed as a deathbed confessional by romantic blues enthusiasts twenty years later, while “Aberdeen Mississippi Blues” would lead to White’s rediscovery. For all the poetic power of Bukka’s fourteen 1940 sides, they were little noticed when released. His 1937 recording, “Shake ‘Em On Down,” was his sole hit, selling over 16,000 copies and inspiring the likes of Big Bill Broonzy to cover it.

If his best work caused no commercial stir, Bukka didn’t much mind. “In the 1940s I played my music everywhere,” Bukka told McKee and Chisenhall. When he tired of hoboing his way through the jukejoint circuit Bukka would, in his words, ‘play the girls.’ “I never did want to live off no lady,” he said, “but it was kinda time for me to take some rest, you know.”

When not resting, Bukka often played blues on Beale Street with such old-time Memphis blues veter-

Photo by Burnham Ware



ans as Gus Cannon and Frank Stokes. A skinny cousin named Riley King arrived in Memphis after World War II and roomed for awhile with Bukka. "Booker was the only one of us that ever went into show business," B.B. King recalled years later. "He had a steel bar he would put on his finger, and the sound he'd get from the strings with it would go all through me. I never could do that, but I learned to trill my hand..." By the time B.B. was enjoying his first hits in 1951, Bukka had quit hoboing and was little known beyond his Memphis neighborhood.

That started to change when Samuel Charters praised Bukka in his influential 1959 book, *The Country Blues*. "He had a heavy, dark voice," wrote Charters, who compared Bukka to Charley Patton. "Fixin' to Die Blues" was reissued on the Lp, also entitled *The Country Blues*, which complemented Charters' book, and began to be covered by the likes of Bob Dylan. In 1963 blues enthusiast John Fahey addressed a letter to 'Bukka White, Old Blues Singer, c/o General Delivery, Aberdeen, Miss.' It was a shot in the dark that found its target: a relative of Bukka's worked at the Aberdeen post office and forwarded the letter to Bukka in Memphis. Bukka's cordial reply led to his Takoma label 'rediscovery' debut, *Mississippi Blues*, and in short order to appearances at folk festivals here and abroad (he even sang at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City).

Big and bluff, Bukka cut an impressive figure wherever he performed with his ringing National guitar and growly vocals. He was, among other things, an ex-boxer who walloped his guitar while spinning what he called 'sky songs,' extemporaneous poetry about whatever happened to be on Bukka's mind. Bukka clearly relished his role as living legend: "I did better than I ever did in my life," he said of his rediscovery success. "He was sure enough of himself as an artist," Charters wrote of the rediscovered Bukka, "that in more than 30 years his style changed as little as the

stones scattered along the banks of the Yazoo River.” Yet within the constancy of Bukka’s music was a refreshing lyrical immediacy, a reflection of an artist who wasn’t merely recreating a fabled past but who was actively creating in the moment. He never lost the eager spark of the kid who ran away from the mules of Mississippi for the nightlife of St. Louis. “I was like a game rooster,” Bukka said of his young self, “and I’d jump up for any big kind of congregation and do my thing. I wasn’t ashamed or nothing.”

## **John Lee Hooker**

**(ca. 1920- )**



Photo by Tom Copi

It is the mark of a savvy entertainer to sense what an audience wants and then deliver. By that standard John Lee Hooker has been a show biz genius for nearly a half century now, delivering the primal groove of “Boogie Chillen” to African-American audiences in 1948, ‘folk-blues’ to the coffeehouse circuit in the 1960s, ‘endless boogie’ to 1970s party animals, and Grammy winning duets with blues-influenced rockers to the world in the 1980s-1990s. By any measure his has been a remarkable career; by comparison with



Photo by David Gahr

other downhome Delta bluesmen, it is completely unparalleled.

Born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Hooker learned his idiosyncratic guitar style from his stepfather, Will Moore. "The style I'm playing now, that's what he was playing," Hooker told Jim and Amy O'Neal (*Living Blues*, Autumn 1979). "I'm doin' it identical to his style. And nobody else plays that style." Having absorbed a few additional pointers by observing the likes of Tony Hollins and Tommy McClennan, Hooker made his way to Memphis when he was about fifteen. Three years later he passed through Cincinnati ("I stayed there about three years," he recalled) before settling in Detroit in 1943.

It was at a Detroit house party that record store owner Elmer Barber heard Hooker and was sufficiently impressed to alert Sensation label owner Bernie Besman to this new talent. Hooker, who recalled Besman and Barber as "this Jewish guy and this black cat," made his first recordings in 1948. "Boogie Chillen," which Besman placed with the Los Angeles-based Modern label, was a phenomenal debut: "The

thing caught afire,” Hooker told the O’Neals. “It was ringing all across the country.” B.B. King well recalls its popularity and impact on other bluesmen: “Hardly anybody around at the time didn’t play ‘Boogie Chillen.’”

The next few years often found Hooker in the R&B charts with such hits as “I’m In the Mood” and “Crawling Kingsnake.” By the mid-Fifties, however, the R&B charts were rarely touched by solo bluesmen like Hooker. His recordings still sold respectably, but it was a savvy move into the ‘folk-blues’ circuit in the early 1960s which gave Hooker’s career a welcome resurgence.

Hooker’s performances here from 1970 are from the year in which his collaboration with Canned Heat would propel him into yet another phase of his career. Before the ‘endless boogie,’ however, he delivered these smoldering solo performances of “I’ll Never Get Out of These Blues Alive,” a title first waxed for Bluesway in 1966, and “It Serves Me Right to Suffer,” a sentiment Hooker first expressed for Vee Jay in 1964. Percussive of notes spray from Hooker’s guitar between the near silences (the feet are always there as rhythm section) and the somber confessions: “My doctor wrote me out a prescription for milk, cream and alcohol.” Ry Cooder once extolled this performance at length to Jas Obrecht (Blues Revue Quarterly, No. 9). “The thing is this little Super 8 film somebody in Seattle did with him in the Sixties, where he sings ‘Serves Me Right to Suffer,’” said Cooder. “He’s in a trance the whole time...I mean, this guy’s got no rapid eye movement at all. He’s just into it, and it’s so deep. And it’s the best performance I’ve ever heard from him...It’s all done in this no mind condition. And he plays and he sings, the unbroken thread which is where his music is at. You watch his hands...His thumb bends way back...Hooker has hyper-extended joints...Pads shaped like frogs...Rhythmic tension in his feet. Now you tell me that isn’t hip.”



Son House imitating Charley Patton. Photo courtesy of Yazoo Records

## **Recording Information**

*The footage presented in this video is some of the rarest material we have ever discovered. The performances by Johnny Shines, 1970 (SWEET HOME CHICAGO, KINDHEARTED WOMAN and I DON'T KNOW), John Lee Hooker, 1970 (I'LL NEVER GET OUT OF THESE BLUES ALIVE and IT SERVES ME RIGHT TO SUFFER) and Son House, 1968 (EMPIRE STATE EXPRESS and LEVEE CAMP MOAN) come from outtakes from sessions recorded at the University Of Washington. These were not known to exist but Stefan Grossman had a feeling that more footage from the original sessions recorded between 1968-1972 should be in storage somewhere at the University. Between the years of 1993 and 1994 with the great help of University Of Washington archivist Laurel Sercombe, the material was discovered in long forgotten boxes and rusty film cans in a dusty corner at the Ethnomusicology Archive offices.*

*Son House performing I HAD THE BLUES THIS MORNING and TALK ABOUT THE BLUES were recorded in England in 1970 by Pat Gavin. The closing number, DON'T MIND PEOPLE GRINNING IN YOUR FACE, was recorded by the BBC in 1972 but never transmitted.*

*Gene Rosenthal recorded Johnny Shines, Honeyboy Edwards and Walter Horton in 1969 in Chicago, Illinois at the Thunderbird Motel. The titles LOVE OF MINE, GOING TO ALGIERS, RAMBLIN' and TELL ME HOW YOU WANT YOUR ROLLING DONE are from these sessions. This material has never before been available on video.*

*The titles by Bukka White come from a film circa 1970 from Memphis, Tennessee.*

Johnny Shines



1. **SON HOUSE**  
Talk About The Blues
2. **JOHNNY SHINES**  
Sweet Home Chicago
3. **JOHNNY SHINES**  
Kindhearted Woman
4. **BUKKA WHITE**  
I'm Going Settle Down
5. **JOHN LEE HOOKER**  
I'll Never Get Out Of These Blues Alive
6. **SON HOUSE**  
I Had The Blues This Morning
7. **SHINES/EDWARDS/HORTON**  
Love Of Mine
8. **BUKKA WHITE**  
Old Lady

9. **JOHNNY SHINES**  
Going To Algiers
10. **JOHNNY SHINES**  
Tell Me How You Want Your  
Rolling Done
11. **JOHN LEE HOOKER**  
It Serves Me Right To Suffer
12. **SON HOUSE**  
Empire State Express
13. **SON HOUSE**  
Levee Camp Moan
14. **JOHNNY SHINES**  
I Don't Know
15. **BUKKA WHITE**  
Freight Train Blues
16. **JOHNNY SHINES**  
Ramblin'
17. **SON HOUSE**  
Don't Mind People Grinning In  
Your Face



Son House

The Mississippi Delta is the source of America's deep and pervasive blues tradition. At a time when that tradition appeared in danger of disappearing, many of its most elemental practitioners reappeared to remind us of the bruising force of this music's headwaters. They were living legends who demonstrated strong bonds with legends passed. This is music which has mesmerized everyone from a young Muddy Waters to today's blues-based rockers. Its earthy vitality remains fresh in rare performances rife with slide guitars, driving rhythms and songs as searing as a hellhound's bay across the Delta darkness.

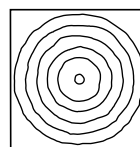
**VESTAPOL 13038**

Running Time: 62 minutes • B/W and Color  
Front Photo: Bukka White by Stephen LaVere  
Back photos: Johnny Shines & Son House by Tom Copi  
Duplicated in SP Mode/Real Time Duplication  
Nationally distributed by Rounder Records,  
One Camp Street, Cambridge, MA 02140  
Representation to Music Stores by Mel Bay Publications  
© 1995 Vestapol Productions / A division of  
Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop Inc.

ISBN: 1-884691-35-8



0 1167-13038-3 3



**ROUNDER**