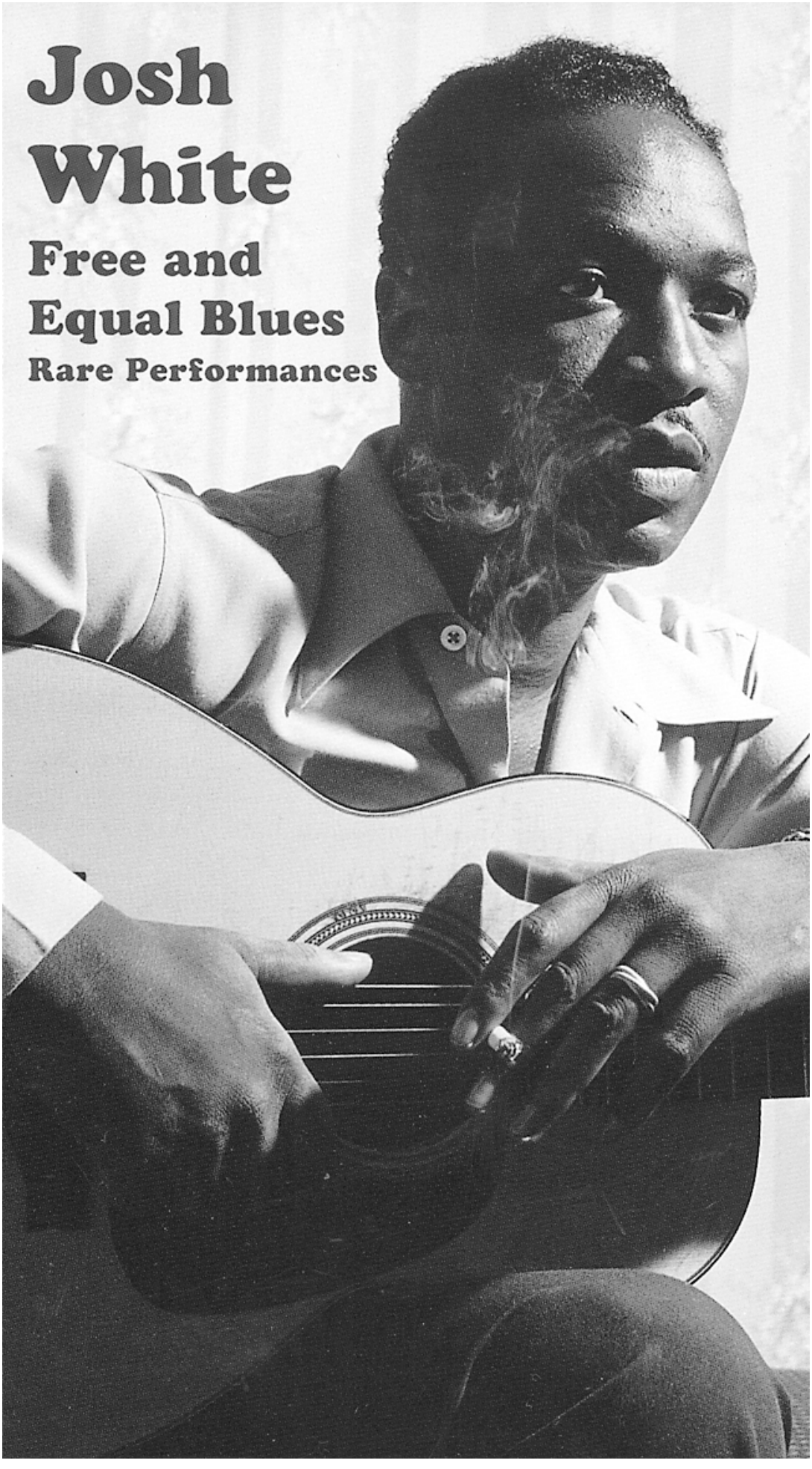
Josh White

Free and Equal Blues

Rare Performances



JOSH WHITE

Free and Equal Blues

by Elijah Wald

If ever a man was victim of his own success, it is Josh White, and this selection of television appearances from the 1960s shows both what made him a star and what led to his posthumous obscurity. Today, Josh's name draws blank stares from a lot of pretty knowledgeable music listeners. Some blues encyclopedias do not even list him; folk music histories mention him only in passing. And yet, few artists were so influential in the modern development of folk and blues.

Josh (he always insisted on being known by his first name) was the first person to bring the acoustic guitar-and-vocal style variously called "country" or "folk" blues to a large, mainstream (that is to say, white) audience. Next to Burl Ives, he was the biggest folk star of the 1940s. He sang blues and chain-gang songs along with English ballads, contemporary political songs, and unclassifiable pieces like his pop hit, "One Meat Ball." He helped to reshape the white audience's image of the black entertainer, eschewing the clowning that had extended from the minstrel shows to the stage performances of popular jazzmen like Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller, while also avoiding the somber, almost inhuman dignity of Paul Robeson and the other "Negro Spiritual" singers (who had previously been the only black "folk" musicians accepted by white concert audiences). Developing a modern, sexy, politically and racially aware image, he became a model for smooth African-American performers like Harry Belafonte and Sam Cooke and folk stars like Peter, Paul and Mary, and, through them, for generations of later artists who may have never heard his name.

In his heyday, Josh was a ubiquitous presence on the entertainment scene, one of America's most visible folksingers and black entertainment figures. He was one of the first African Americans to be profiled in *Current Biography* and to be interviewed in magazines like *Collier's* and *Look*. His recordings were released on a variety of major labels, as well as by more specialized folk outfits. He was a popular radio personality, broadcasting his own programs and appearing on the major variety shows. He acted in several Broadway plays, and even had a supporting role in a Hollywood western. Mostly, though, he was a cabaret singer and concert artist. He headlined for years at Greenwich Village's Cafe Society, and toured widely throughout the United States. In the 1950s, when his career was derailed by the Truman-McCarthy "red scare," he established a beachhead for blues in

Europe, touring and recording in Sweden, France, Italy and many times in Great Britain, where the BBC did several series of programs built around his life and work.

Along the way, Josh helped create the mythology of the blues. Though he had been an entertainer since his teens, he stressed a romantic, "folk" background that ignored the polish and professionalism of the blues world he knew so well. He linked his music to chain gangs, lynchings, streetcorner minstrels, and the hard life of Southern sharecroppers. This image would define the blues for most white listeners and, ironically, as the myths grew, Josh's own reputation faded. The young aficionados of the 1960s blues revival, though weened on his records, turned to other artists who had remained poor and unrecognized, and dismissed him as a slick nightclub act.

Josh was certainly that, but he was also a great deal more. He was born on the poor side of the tracks in Greenville, South Carolina, on February 11, 1914. His father was a tailor and Methodist preacher; his mother played autoharp and sang religious songs. His first years seem to have been relatively comfortable, but when he was seven his father got in an altercation with a white rent collector, and was arrested and beaten so severely that he spent most of the rest of his life in mental institutions. Forced to help support his mother and siblings, Josh became the "lead boy" for a succession of blind musicians, playing a tambourine on street corners and traveling by foot and freight train across the southeastern states. It was not an easy life. He recalled being hungry and miserable, and freezing on the streets of Chicago when his most prominent employer, a "guitar evangelist" named Blind Joe Taggart, took him north on a recording trip. His travels were also marked by the racist abuse common in the rural South; he would tell of a double lynching he had seen in Georgia, and of being arrested and beaten by police in Florida. "I never had a childhood," he told his biographer, Robert Shelton. "Like having skates or a sled or what kids would have in those days. I never had a toy because I've worked all my life."

Hard as it was, though, Josh's years with the blind men provided him with an invaluable foundation for his later career. In the early 1900s, Greenville was a noted musical center, home to black string bands and an intricate, ragtime-oriented guitar style best known today from the playing of the Reverend Gary Davis. Along with several religious singers, Josh led Davis's old partner, the ragtime-bluesman William Walker, and Walker's brother Joe. William Walker is one of the legends of blues guitar; he recorded only one 78 single, but it proves him to have been

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

among the most virtuosic players in the ragtime-blues genre, and Josh described him as the greatest player he ever saw, the "Art Tatum" of the guitar. Though Josh would say that the blind men refused to teach him, fearing that once he was able to play he would go off and leave them, he showed an early affinity for the smooth, swinging Greenville style. While still only fourteen, he was brought to Chicago to record as Taggart's sideman, and became the youngest soloist of the era when he cut his own version of the wry gospel song "Scandalous and a Shame."

By the next year, Josh was on his own. He became a favorite around the Paramount record company offices, and got work on records by the blues pianist Charlie Spand and a white hillbilly band, the Carver Boys, in one of the few interracial partnerships of the 1920s. It is also during this period that he seems to have met Blind Lemon Jefferson, another Paramount artist. While Josh would exaggerate their relationship in later interviews, Jefferson was the biggest male blues star of the day, and undoubtedly made an impression on his teenage colleague.

Three years later, in 1932, Josh embarked on his first career as a solo blues performer. A pair of talent scouts who knew him from his Paramount days searched him out in Greenville and signed him to the new ARC label. He moved to New York, and became one of ARC's house artists. The Depression had driven many record labels out of business and changed the blues recording world from a hit-or-miss, experimental market to a streamlined, hit-making industry in which every success was quickly followed up by covers, sound-alike imitations, answer

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

songs and sequels. ARC was a pure product of the times; it had risen from the ashes of its bankrupt predecessors by pressing budget 78s to be sold under department store house brands. Josh's first releases for the label were covers of full-price records by artists on ARC's sister label, Vocalion, often backed with songs from his own repertoire. Over the next few years, he would be a regular seller for ARC, recording more records every year, and becoming one of the most popular "race" artists in the Southeast. Though blues histories tend to minimize his contribution, black guitarists like Turner Foddrell and John Jackson, who grew up around the area in the 1930s, remember him as one of the region's big three, along with Blind Boy Fuller and Buddy Moss. Josh recorded two sessions of duets with Moss, and Fuller, though ten years older and destined to be a bigger star on the southern blues scene, learned at least a couple of songs off Josh's records.

ARC was based in New York, and Josh settled in Harlem, joining the flood of young African Americans gravitating towards what had become the country's black cultural center. He took to this new world immediately, even though his music was hardly what the sophisticated Harlem crowd was after. The city had shown little enthusiasm for the wave of "down home" guitar blues that swept the South and Midwest; it preferred the sophisticated vaudeville approach of Bessie Smith or Alberta Hunter, and by the 1930s even that was considered passé. Josh undoubtedly got some work playing rent parties, which tended to hire only a pianist or guitar player, but his wife Carol, whom

he married in 1934, recalled that much of his work was done at parties for white executives at the record company and at NBC, where he got regular radio work backing a local gospel quartet, the Southernaires.

Josh's early blues records, all of which have been reissued on the Austrian Document label, had an infectious, youthful energy, set off by his fast, clean guitar work and flashy vocal effects, which included a luminous falsetto and a growling Louis Armstrong imitation. In 1933, he expanded into gospel, billed as "Joshua White, The Singing Christian," and became the only singer of the period to be equally successful in both sacred and secular music. Indeed, his success was great enough that he had to adopt the pseudonym "Pinewood Tom" for his later blues releases, to avoid confusing saintly and sinful record buyers. As he became more popular, he followed the current trend for piano-guitar duets, modeling himself on Leroy Carr, who had pioneered a blues ballad style that would be the pattern for everyone from Robert Johnson to Ray Charles. He even received the imprimatur of the master: Carr played piano for him on a couple of records and used him briefly as a sideman, the only time a third musician was added to Carr's normal recording team with the guitarist Scrapper Blackwell.

In the light of Josh's later career, it is important to note that what he put on record at this time was only a small portion of his repertoire. Recorded blues, especially in the 1930s, provides a completely skewed picture of what the artists were capable of playing. In Josh's case, a Greenville schoolmate says that back home he had been singing not blues but pop ballads, at least at the respectable functions she attended. This was typical; many of the great blues singers recorded tin pan alley pop songs, or country dance music, on occasion, and demonstrated a mastery of the genres that suggests that they frequently played such material live and would have recorded a lot more of it if the market had been receptive.

What the market wanted from black vernacular musicians, however, was streamlined, sophisticated blues balladry and faintly risque goodtime music. Carr, for one, recorded a smooth, crooning version of Irving Berlin's "How About Me," but that was of little interest to a recording world that already had the likes of Bing Crosby, and at his next session he was back singing "Gambler's Blues." As in more recent eras, the pop world wanted reliable sellers, and the stars of the blues catalogues were less the quirky individualists beloved of later collectors and blues enthusiasts than those artists who could deliver consistently. Peetie Wheatstraw, "The Devil's Son-in-Law" and "High Sheriff

of Hell," made dozens of records that were monotonously similar to one another, from their opening piano riff to his trademark falsetto whoop, but his clear, mellow voice and tough lyrics made him one of the biggest blues stars of the 1930s, and young players like Robert Johnson copied both his vocal mannerisms and his Satanic image.

It is interesting, in the light of their modern reputations, to compare Johnson and Josh as they were in the 1930s. Today, Johnson is the most famous of prewar bluesmen, a legendary Delta genius who sold his soul to the devil and recorded tortured, haunting songs in a deep, earthy style. In his lifetime, though, he was a relatively obscure and minor figure, and both of his most imitated records, "Dust My Broom" and "Sweet Home Chicago," were adapted from hits by the popular star Kokomo Arnold, whom Josh also frequently covered. Like Josh, Johnson appealed to his contemporary fans not because he was deep or earthy but because he was young and hip, putting a Carr-like polish on the rougher music of his elders. While Johnson had nothing like Josh's commercial success, his tastes and aspirations were similar. When his career was cut short by his murder in 1938, the producer John Hammond Sr. was trying to bring him to New York for the legendary "Spirituals to Swing" concert, and it is tempting to speculate that, had he lived, he might have gone on to become what Josh became, the sophisticated blues king of Cafe Society.

As it happened, Josh's career very nearly came to an equally abrupt close. In 1936, just as Blind Boy Fuller was giving the Carolina style a new popularity, he cut his right hand so badly that several fingers were almost amputated (according to his interviews, he slipped on a patch of ice and cut his hand on a milk bottle; according to more probable reports, he hurt himself by punching his hand through a glass door during a fight over a woman). For the next four years, he was out of music, forced to make a living running an elevator and doing janitorial work. In the normal course of events, that would have been the end of his musical life. By 1940, acoustic blues had pretty much run its course as African-American popular music. Lonnie Johnson, the most versatile of the early stars, would have a last hurrah in 1948 with the r&b ballad "Tomorrow Night," and Chicago's South and West sides provided bar gigs for veterans of the Mississippi scene, but by and large the "country" bluesmen faded into obscurity, taking day jobs and nursing dreams of former glory. Josh, however, got lucky. On New Year's Eve, 1939, he happened to be singing a few songs at a party, and was spotted by Leonard DePaur, a black choral director working on a musical based on

Cover photos courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

the John Henry story. The show was to star Paul Robeson, and the producers were looking for a guitarist and singer who could play the part of "Blind Lemon," who acted as a sort of Greek chorus for the action on stage. They had heard Josh's old records, but had no idea where to find him until DePaur stumbled upon him and brought him to their offices.

John Henry closed after a few performances, but Josh had found a new audience. John Hammond saw him, liked his work, and produced his ground-breaking *Chain Gang* album for Columbia Records. The album featured Josh with a backing group, the Carolinians, which was drawn from the *John Henry* chorus and is chiefly notable for including the future civil rights leader Bayard Rustin. Under DePaur's supervision, they sang chain gang songs in the refined, highly-arranged manner of the college "Ne-

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

gro spiritual" groups, which rather undercut the power of the material but made it more accessible to white nightclub listeners.

Josh was soon performing on his own as well. Though still living in Harlem, he took to hanging out with the Greenwich Village folk crowd. The young folksong collector Alan Lomax hired him for a radio series, *Back Where I Come From*, with Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Leadbelly, and the Golden Gate Quartet, getting him his first national exposure. (Along with singing, Josh often spoke Leadbelly's lines, as the show's director, Nicholas Ray, feared that audiences would not understand the older man's thick Southern accent.) He also became a regular guest at the hootenannies being held at Almanac House, a loft space that was home to Pete Seeger, Guthrie, and a shifting array of folk talent, and acted as guitar accompanist when the young, left-wing folkies recorded two political albums as the Almanac Singers.

A more polished and professional performer than the other folksingers, Josh soon moved on to more profitable gigs. As an offshoot of the Lomax show, Ray got Josh and Leadbelly a three-month residency at a popular New York bohemian night spot, the Village Vanguard. This was the first major club booking for a folk act, and the team was an immediate success, with Josh's clean guitar work and easy manner balancing Leadbelly's more rough-hewn sound. Leadbelly himself was by no means the primitive bluesman he has often been painted; he wore tailored

suits, carried a gold-headed cane, and cheerfully threw in everything from Gene Autry numbers to Hawaiian novelty songs along with his blues and folk material. Still, the New York audience tended to view him as a magnificent creature from the depths of the South, as "the singing murderer," rather than as a professional entertainer. Josh saw the appeal of this image and included a touch of it in his own persona, but blended it with the articulate, urbane approach of the Harlem jazzmen.

At this time, the folk music world was intimately linked to the political left, especially (though by no means exclusively) to the Communist Party, and Josh injected a strong political tone into his work. His next album was a collection of protest songs against "Jim Crow" segregation, which he wrote in collaboration with a Harlem Renaissance poet, Waring Cuney. Called *Southern Exposure*, the album boasted liner notes by Richard Wright and brought Josh to a wide audience of progressives, including the top figures in the "New Deal" administration. He had previously performed at the White House as part of a Lomax folk program, but now was asked back as a musical spokesman for civil rights. He made an immediate hit, and during the war years became so closely associated with the Roosevelts that he was referred to in the press as "the presidential minstrel." Along with his nightclub residencies, he performed at hundreds of benefit concerts and appeared on wartime propaganda broadcasts written by Langston Hughes, among others. Newspaper and magazine pieces (often in left-wing publications like the *Daily Worker* and *PM*) emphasized his fighting stance on racial issues, and he was frequently quoted as a forward-looking voice of Negro America. "People who have heard of me as a 'blues singer' generally expect something like 'Ol Black Joe,' or the customary melancholy wail of a defeated people," he told a reporter in 1946. "That's not for me. Contrary to popular conception, the blues are not always concerned with love, razors, dice and death. I strive to present the other side of the blues, the blues that criticize man's inhumanity to man, the side that has long been regarded as non-commercial because of its social militancy."

If Josh's outspokeness on racial issues was what attracted most of the press attention in these years, what drew the audience was his swinging music and performing style, and his unabashed sex appeal. After his partnership with Leadbelly, he had gone on to form a duo with the white torch singer Libby Holman. Holman had been a Broadway star before marrying an heir to the Reynolds tobacco fortune and going through a scandalous trial when he died in mysterious circumstances. She and Josh recorded an album together, then had a several-month a resi-

dency at La Vie Parisienne, a sophisticated club specializing in French cabaret acts. As an interracial team, both in New York and later on a national tour, they raised eyebrows and excited rumors, and the piquancy of the association helped set a pattern for Josh's later career. He became the first black male entertainer to flaunt his sex appeal to a white audience, and this added a daring flair to his straightforward political stance.

Josh's association with Holman also began the gradual disenchantment of the hard-core folk crowd. Brownie McGhee recalled that when he came up from North Carolina to Washington in 1942 to act as an accompanist for Sonny Terry, all the important folk people urged him to move to New York because "They said they didn't have any blues singers up there; that Josh White was the only one, and he'd gone white." McGhee laughingly added that soon after coming to New York he met Josh and Holman, and "when I saw how much money he was making, I said, 'Hey, show me how to go white, too.'"

Josh had not by any means "gone white," but he was cannily adapting his act and repertoire to fit his new audience. Billed as a folk singer, he selected songs from the Anglo-Irish repertoire to leaven his blues material, and added a few jazz and cabaret numbers as well. By far the best guitarist on the folk scene, he developed new ways to accompany this broad range of music, in the process influencing virtually every folk player that followed. He also came up with a new style of presentation. Rather than the scholarly approach of other folk singers, he was the ultimate in bluesy sophistication. He appeared in tailored velvet or silk shirts, open to display his chest, and his muscles would ripple as he played. He would stride on stage, throw his right leg over the back of a chair, and tuck his lighted cigarette behind his ear, the smoke forming a gauzy halo above his head as he slid into a sinuous reading of a slow ballad like "I Gave My Love a Cherry," then followed up with a hard-driving blues or a swinging version of "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho."

Later blues historians have tended to dismiss Josh's music of this period as slicker and less powerful than his 1930s recordings, but the records themselves tell quite another story. His early blues work was fast, smooth, and infectiously energetic, but little different from what was being done by other Southeastern players (except in his unusual fondness for open D, or "sebastopol" tuning). His 1940s cabaret style, by contrast, was unique, instantly recognizable from the first note he played. Perhaps because his right hand had been out of commission for several years, he had developed an astonishing left-hand vibrato; no one before or since has gotten a purer, more singing tone

John White and Josh White Jr.

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

out of the acoustic guitar. His arrangements were also unlike anyone else's, building on the melodic style of his early gospel work, but adding jazz chords and a brilliant use of space, so that they framed and supported his vocals while giving them plenty of room to breathe. His voice had gained depth and emotional range with the years, and picked up some distinctive mannerisms: an occasional break to falsetto, a way of drifting up to notes, and a theatrical habit of switching from singing to talking when he wanted to emphasize a particular phrase.

What some call slickness others would call professionalism, and Josh was a pro in 1944 just as he had been in 1934; in both periods, he had changed and grown with his audience, finding new styles to suit new situations. What set him apart from peers like Big Bill Broonzy, who attempted with relatively

little success to follow him into the white club world, was that he was younger and more adaptable, able to tailor the style that had made him a blues star to fit the tastes of the wealthy, educated cabaret audience. While his 1930s contemporaries were back doing farm work, taking jobs on assembly lines, or singing for tips on street corners, he had a national hit with “One Meat Ball,” and was featured on stage, screen, radio and, as soon as it became widely available, television, as well as filling theaters and concert halls across the country.

In the summer of 1950, he was at the peak of his career. He had a new movie out, had recently appeared in a non-singing role in a Broadway play, and was touring Europe in the company of Eleanor Roosevelt. Then, while performing in England, he got a call from his manager saying that he had been named in *Red Channels*, the “bible of the blacklist.” The red scare had been building for several years, and Cafe Society had been one of the first New York venues to get caught up in the hysteria, due to the family connections of its owner, Barney Josephson, whose brother went to jail for politically motivated passport fraud. To the disgust of some friends, Josh had chosen to distance himself from the club, and from other actively radical sectors of the folk scene, such as the magazine and musician’s organization People’s Songs. In the political upheavals of the postwar years, he had opted for the respectable, New Deal liberalism of his patroness, Eleanor Roosevelt.

Given this cautious approach, the *Red Channels* listing came as a very nasty shock. His reaction was quick and, in retrospect, reflected a fatal lack of judgement: Without waiting to be suppoenaed, he voluntarily appeared before the House Committee on Unamerican Activities (commonly known as HUAC), testifying that, while he stood by all of the political positions he had taken, and would continue to fight against racism and injustice, he “had been played for a sucker” by organizations that he now understood to have been anti-American. Josh’s action was influenced by the fact that he was not being asked to name names; in a quirk of the red hunts, African Americans were not asked to go through the painful process of denouncing their friends and acquaintances, but only to distance themselves from a famous statement of Paul Robeson’s: that no American Negro would fight for the United States in a war against the Soviet Union. Given that few people agreed with this statement in the first place, it seemed relatively painless for figures like Josh and Jackie Robinson to publicly express their disagreement; the problem was that, in so doing, they were tacitly accepting and augmenting the power of HUAC to demand their cooperation. Fur-

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

Josh White and Libby Holman

thermore, no one at the time noticed that Josh and Robinson had not, in fact, named names. Josh did not betray his friends by name, either in his public testimony or during two subsequent grillings by the FBI, but since HUAC accepted him as a "cooperative witness," he was assumed by almost everyone to have to have done just that. (He did distance himself from Robeson, albeit while making clear his respect for Robeson's earlier work.)

Josh's HUAC testimony earned him the enduring contempt and dislike of the left, which would continue to be the core folk music constituency. Meanwhile, his continued outspokenness on civil rights issues served to make him persona non grata on the right as well, and his refusal to name names kept him on the FBI's "subversive" file until the late 1950s. With no friends on either side of a polarized cultural battlefield; he found his career effectively destroyed. He continued to pick up some nightclub work and occasional college gigs, but for most of the 1950s his main focus shifted to Europe. He made multiple, extended visits to England, recording radio programs for the BBC and publishing a guitar instruction book that would become the seminal text for a generation of English fingerpickers. Then, as the folk revival began to pick up steam back home, he signed contracts with both Elektra and ABC-Paramount records and set out to rebuild his American career.

It was no easy feat. The battle lines drawn during the McCarthy era still held strong, and soon he was caught in the

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

middle of yet another ideological war: the folk purists versus the folk popularizers. The revival that had exploded with the success of Belafonte and the Kingston Trio was polarizing as young fans discovered that what was passing for folk music on television, in nightclubs and on college campuses was a long way from the raw sound of Appalachia or the Mississippi Delta. As a new generation began looking south in search of "real" folk music, Josh was lumped together with the old New York guard of Burl Ives, Oscar Brand and Richard Dyer-Bennett, as a slick purveyor of "folkum," fake folk for the cafe crowd.

The irony was that Josh bore some of the responsibility for the new aesthetic that condemned him. He had always emphasized his own roots in the deepest Southern, black tradition: "The way I learned most of my folk songs . . . was from watching and listening to road gangs," he told Studs Terkel in a radio in-

terview. “The most amazing thing is to hear these whiskey voices — they aren’t beautiful voices, but they’ve got so much soul in them and they know what they’re singing. I’d just sit and listen.” He would speak spoke of himself as an heir of Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson, and always cited their work as an example of true, traditional blues singing. Like Billie Holiday, who paid similar homage to Bessie Smith, he felt that he was bringing a classic music into a new era, polishing its rough edges but keeping its spirit intact. Faced with an audience in search of precisely the rough, raw quality that had scared a previous generation of white listeners away from Leadbelly and towards his own work, he defended his quieter, more polished approach. “I’ve tried to make the songs clear; and I feel if I and some others hadn’t done that and helped people understand what the stories say, we wouldn’t have as much interest in folk music as we do now,” he said in the liner notes to a new album of chaing gang songs. “You don’t have to shout. Sure they did in the open in the South; but now you can get into the intimacy of what this music says. It ought to be as if I were just talking to you.”

Josh made some concessions to the new, purist audience. His later albums tended to focus on the traditional blues and spirituals in his repertoire, leaving out Cafe Society favorites like “I Gave My Love a Cherry” and “On Top of Old Smoky.” Still, his live shows remained substantially unchanged, and if some of the youngsters dismissed him as their their parents’ blues singer, the parents were still showing up at his shows, and plenty of younger fans were coming with them. His repertoire was little changed since the 1940s, and his singing had become more mannered and less powerful, but he was still playing brilliantly and he remained a memorably charismatic entertainer.

Nonetheless, even as business picked up in the wake of the folk boom, Josh could not help but be aware that his greatest days were past. Though only in his 40s, he was an old-timer in an increasingly youthful scene, and he continued to be dogged by political problems. He got some television work in the 1960s, including several appearances on the *Hootenanny* show and a starring role in what was probably the highest-profile folk program of the era, the *Dinner with the President* broadcast hosted by JFK, but in general the major networks continued to find him “unsafe” and overly controversial. Meanwhile, those who felt betrayed by his HUAC appearance shunned him; throughout the 1960s, his name was not mentioned in the pages of *Sing Out!*, the main folk magazine, and he was not invited to the Newport Folk Festivals, the prime showcase for folk talent, until late in the decade. The only old leftist who did not shun him seems to

have been his one-time back-up singer Bayard Rustin, who arranged for him to be one of the performers at Martin Luther King's historic March On Washington.

Professional setbacks were exacerbated by health problems. Troubled by ulcers since the 1940s, he had a first heart attack while on tour in 1961. He also suffered from psoriasis of the fingers that made his nails and skin split, often leaving his hands raw and bleeding after performances. He continued to tour and record, and acted as a mentor to many young folk singers, including Peter, Paul and Mary and Don McLean, but they recall that his larger-than-life stage persona would often be balanced by exhaustion and pain once he was backstage. Though he continued to draw large and enthusiastic audiences virtually until the end, he died while undergoing heart surgery in 1969.

By that time, the critics and historians had already largely passed him by. The new generation of white blues enthusiasts had discovered other artists, who had remained poor and unknown since the 1930s, and dismissed Josh as the cabaret bluesman their parents had liked. There was some musical basis for their views; the "rediscovered" bluesmen played styles that had been preserved in amber since their retirement, while Josh's music had evolved to suit a previous white aesthetic. There was also a degree of patronization, though; the old bluesmen were pointedly discouraged from trying to be contemporary, from using electric guitars or singing non-blues material. At first, even artists like Muddy Waters and B.B. King were rejected by many folk-blues fans as commercial entertainers rather than true bluesmen; where once a musician's being forced to drive a tractor or grow cotton for a living had been a mark of failure, it was now proof of bona fides.

Today this view has mellowed somewhat, but it has by no means vanished from the blues scene. A major figure like Little Milton, who has continued to move with the times, still draws smaller crowds in most white clubs than more romantically "genuine," though relatively minor, artists like the Delta bluesman R.L. Burnside. While Leadbelly discs flood the market, reissues of Josh's work have been few, and most of them focus on his 1930s blues and gospel sides. With the increased segregation of the music business there is no room for him in the folk record bins. His discs are relegated to the blues section, where his most successful and distinctive work, designed to be accessible to a broad, mainstream audience, does not fit the tastes of the hardcore cognoscenti.

There are some signs that this may be changing. Document, the Austrian blues collector label, has expanded its reissues to

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

include Josh's postwar work, and Smithsonian Folkways has issued a collection of Josh's 1940s recordings that ranges across the breadth of his repertoire. His picture has even appeared on a stamp, as part of a "folk" series with Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Sonny Terry. Such recognition is long overdue. By adapting his music to the urban folk audience, Josh blazed a trail for all that has followed. He opened the door for the blues and folk revivals, proving that one musician with a guitar could reach modern audiences as effectively as a full jazz band, and his combination of racial pride and sex appeal became the model for a generation of African-American performers. Almost thirty years after his death, it is high time that his contributions were acknowledged and his music heard.

THE VIDEO CLIPS

1. This clip, filmed sometime in the 1940s, shows Josh in his prime, singing a couple of verses of one of his trademark songs, "The House I Live In." In his shows, Josh would present this piece of Popular Front patriotism as an optimistic response to the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit."

2-8. These songs were filmed for British television in 1965, and include narrative fragments which seem to have been adapted from the autobiographical sections of *The Josh White Song Book*. This was near the end of Josh's career, and, while he is playing well, he is obviously tired. Still, the selection of songs gives a good picture of his prime repertoire:

Photo courtesy of Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.

2. "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" seems to have been a favorite song since childhood, based as it was on his namesake, and it remained a highlight of Josh's concerts throughout his career. It was also one of his most characteristic guitar arrangements, with a fast, swinging rhythmic attack that was quite different from the playing of anyone else on the scene.

3. "Blind Man Stood on the Road and Cried" seems to have been a late addition to Josh's repertoire, added sometime in the 1950s, though he always presented it with a reference to his youth as a "lead boy" for blind street singers. Guitarists will note a characteristic chord shape used for the F and G chords, a seventh played with thumb, partial bar, and the middle finger picking up the third.

4. "Strange Fruit" was made famous by Billie Holiday during her Cafe Society days, but many people preferred Josh's version and it was one of his most-requested numbers. This is a typical reading, stark and direct.

5. "Jelly Jelly" was Josh's adaptation of a popular blues of the early 1940s, a hard-driving, sexy showcase. Energized, he uses his whole body to drive the rhythm, and swings his arms theatrically, pulling the viewer in. The camera misses the overhand slide riff with his left thumb the first time he plays it, but picks it up in the penultimate verse. This was one of Josh's favorite tricks, and is probably the reason he insisted on always playing a 12-fret guitar: that way, he could just slide his hand up

till it hit the guitar body, and didn't have to watch what he was doing. The group surrounding him is made up of young English folk and blues players, including Danny Thompson on bass, the American-born singer Julie Felix, and the guitarist Alexis Korner, whom he name-checks in one verse.

6. "Uncle Sam Says" was one of the White-Cuney compositions on the *Southern Exposure* album, and the specific song that impelled Franklin Roosevelt to invite Josh to the White House. It was inspired by Josh's visit to Fort Dix, where his brother Bill was in basic training; Josh recalled that, as he toured the camp, he saw that the white soldiers were in wooden barracks, while the blacks were stuck out in pup tents, and he was so disgusted that he wrote this song that night.

7. "Free and Equal Blues" was originally recorded as a patter song by its composer, Earl Robinson, and Dooley Wilson ("Sam" in *Casablanca*). Josh started doing it in the Broadway show *Blue Holiday*, as a skit with the comedian Timmie Rodgers, and continued to perform it off and on throughout his career. It was a perfect song for him, combining a traditional tune lifted from "St. James Infirmary" with a wry, stylishly political lyric.

8. "John Henry" was a key song in Josh's life. A play based on it revived his career in 1939, and an extended recording of the story interspersed with songs began his climb back to popularity in the 1950s after his HUAC testimony. He plays it in open D, or "sebastopol" tuning, and it is surprising that this should be the only song on this video played in that tuning, since it was a favorite of Josh's, used for most of his gospel material as well as many blues arrangements.

9-10. These versions of "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" and "I Wish the World Were Colorblind" seem to be Josh's last filmed appearances, made in Sweden in 1967. They are chiefly interesting for the appearance of his daughter Judy, then 19, the strongest singer in the White family. Judy had made a record as half of the duo Judy & Bongi, with Miriam Makeba's daughter, and frequently accompanied Josh on New York gigs.

11-19. Filmed in Sweden in 1962, this full concert shows Josh in better condition and spirits, slimmer and more energized than in the later performances. The program includes only one blues and no gospel, which was unusual for him, but is otherwise typical of his work in this period. Though long past his glory days of the 1940s, this is the Josh of the folk boom, who the next year would be voted America's third most popular folk singer in a *Billboard* magazine poll of college students, after Harry Belafonte and Pete Seeger, but ahead of Bob Dylan.

11. “Whatcha Gonna Do” was one of Josh’s 1940s classics, recorded multiple times (including for Decca, with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee providing back-up). It has one of his fastest guitar charts propelling a humorously bluesy lyric.

12. “Scarlet Ribbons,” like “I Wish the World Were Colorblind,” exemplifies the Josh White that the folk purists hated. It is an example of the sort of pseudo pastoral that had been being composed by the romantic intelligentsia ever since the court of Queen Elizabeth I, the work of professional poets and songwriters attempting a refined variation on the music of the rural, working class or peasant population. In both spirit and execution, it is this tradition more than the rawer style of Woody Guthrie or Leadbelly that should be recognized as the roots of the modern singer-songwriter movement, and Josh was a key artist in the evolution of its 20th century variant. His combination of blues licks, a simple, “folky” vocal delivery, and slick sentiment were typical of the 1950s and early 1960s, and were widely immitated by both black and white performers. Folk-pop singers on both sides of the Atlantic adapted his guitar arrangements and tried to copy his studiedly casual performing style.

13. “Cindy” shows Josh’s ability to take traditional white folk material and reshape it to fit his style. Originally a southern mountain banjo hoedown, it is reshaped as a jazzily syncopated singalong. Josh’s performance is infectious, as he intricately plays with the tempo and the audience, and this was always one of his most popular live numbers.

14. “Danny Boy” shows Josh in his guise as the father of the Roger Whittacker style of middle-of-the-road folk presenters; this is the sort of thing that appealed beyond the folk scene and drew middle-class English variety audiences. It is also the material the blues fans most hated, with good reason. It represents a completely different aesthetic, and one that has dated poorly. Still, anyone who wants to understand the appeal of folk music to a mass audience in the 1960s must take account of the overwhelming popularity of artists who followed this approach, and of Josh’s influence on the field.

15. “You Know Baby What I Want from You” was one of Josh’s favorite seduction songs, something he would sing to a young woman at a party after a gig, with predictable results.

16. “Number Twelve Train,” originally recorded in 1927 by Victoria Spivey, was one of Josh’s show-stoppers, and young guitarists spent long hours locked in their bedrooms trying to figure out how to play his train immitation. None ever managed to duplicate the power and energy of his version, with its highballing right-hand work and bright, singing vibrato. Josh gets

an ovation even before he starts, with his trademark cigarette behind the ear routine.

17. “Waltzing Matilda” was one of Josh’s most popular numbers, dating back to his Cafe Society days. He had the innovative (some would say misguided) idea to take the rollicking Australian drinking song and perform it as a mournful ballad.

18. “Apples, Peaches and Cherries” was another pseudo-pastoral, this time from the pen of Lewis Allen, better known as the politically motivated lyricist of “Strange Fruit” and “The House I Live In.”

19. Cole Porter’s “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To” provides a typically seductive finish; Josh’s face gleams with sweat, his thumb punches home the guitar shots, and the girl looks up at him musingly, her boyfriend forgotten.

Elijah Wald is a musician and writer, author of the first full-scale Josh White biography, JOSH WHITE: SOCIETY BLUES (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

Photo courtesy of Larry Cohn

Josh White was a key figure in the evolution of the folk and blues music revivals, a brilliant guitarist and dashingly sexy cabaret star who for three decades was the world's most popular acoustic blues performer. After a childhood leading blind street singers through the South, Josh was a popular recording artist in the 1930s golden age of acoustic blues, then in the 1940s became the first bluesman to capture a large mainstream audience. Though his smooth, polished style is quite unlike the harder-edged approach that many people now consider basic to blues, his unique, lyrical guitar work and soulful singing made him a formative influence on the international folk scene. This video begins with a rare filmed snippet from the 1940s, then includes a range of European performances from the 1960s, showing the breadth and variety of Josh's repertoire, from traditional blues and gospel to folk revival standards and cabaret material. It captures the intimate, sophisticated style, swing and power that made Josh the most influential guitarist on the early folk scene and one of America's defining entertainers.

Titles include: The House I Live In, Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, Blind Man Stood on the Road and Cried, Strange Fruit, Jelly Jelly, Uncle Sam Says, Free and Equal Blues, John Henry, Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out, I Wish the World Were Colorblind, Whatcha Gonna Do, Scarlet Ribbons, Cindy, Danny Boy, You Know Baby What I Want from You, Number Twelve Train, Waltzing Matilda, Apples, Peaches and Cherries & You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To

Running time: 58 minutes • b/w
Cover photos courtesy of
Douglas A. Yaeger Productions, Ltd.
Nationally distributed by Rounder Records,
One Camp Street, Cambridge, MA 02140
Representation to Music Stores by
Mel Bay Publications

A division of
Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop, Inc.
Visit our web site at www.guitarvideos.com

Vestapol 13090

ISBN: 1-57940-909-1

0 11671 30909 5

ROUNDER