Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee
Red River Blues
Rare Performances 1948-1974

Their was the mixed blessing to live ‘long lives in interesting times,’ to paraphrase a Chinese curse. In some quarters, their stature would be considerably higher had they faded into obscurity following a brief but brilliant pre-War recording career in the orbit of Blind Boy Fuller and the so-called Piedmont blues school. Instead, they persevered and found themselves in New York City at the headwater of the urban folk boom, sharing stages and living quarters with Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly. They played the streets of Harlem, union rallies, hootenannies and Broadway shows. There were countless recordings and opportunities to bring their style of ‘folk blues’ to campuses, concert halls and folk festivals. Had their road ended sometime in the early 1960s, they would be affectionately remembered along the lines of Big Bill Broonzy to the legions who discovered ‘country blues’ by way of their 1950s ‘folk’ recordings and performances.

But Sonny and Brownie were indefatigable, and in time this worked against them. The rediscovery of often infirm but legendary pre-War bluesmen circa 1963-65 bolstered an esthetic which valued the raw over the refined, and the
Terry-McGhee team had too much stage savvy to appear fresh plucked from the field. Suddenly their ‘folk blues’ style was seen as old hat, slick and irrelevant to anyone tracing a blues-rock lineage from Son House to Muddy Waters to the Rolling Stones. The enthusiasm the ‘blues revival’ lavished on such varied purveyors of blues–roots as Sleepy John Estes and Howlin’ Wolf was withheld from Brownie and Sonny, who in truth had been the ‘gateway experience’ by which many blues purists found their way to the harder stuff.

Had they hung it up around 1970, Sonny and Brownie might yet have retained a modicum of ‘the right stuff’ in the eyes of roots-oriented blues historians. But they were still able and knew only the road (by then a well-worn one) and continued, to quote Brownie’s signature song, to “Walk On.” Though scarcely evident in the late (1974) performances here, their relationship had become strained to the point that they tolerated one another’s company because that bookings for Sonny and Brownie were more plentiful than for either artist alone. Some of their late performances together were by turns painful and comical, marked by muttered onstage disparagements and mutual attempts at musical derailment. They had broken up the longest running (and best known) professional duo in blues history by 1982, ostensibly over Sonny’s refusal to work with a band as Brownie desired. Each continued to have a solo career, albeit on a more limited basis. Sonny passed away in 1986, and when Brownie died a decade later, the inevitable reassessment of this too-readily-dismissed duo was in progress.

That reassessment was prompted by significant reissues in recent years of key recordings by Terry and McGhee both as a team and as soloists. 1990-91 saw three reissues of their extensive recordings for Moses Asch: Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing (Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40011), Sonny Terry: The Folkways Years, 1944-1963 (Smithsonian/Folkways CD SF 40033) and Brownie McGhee: The Folkways Years, 1945-1959 (Smithsonian/Folkways CD SF 40034). Collectively, these reissues presented both the ‘folk blues’ sound which Sonny and Brownie honed to a fine art in the 1950s and the country blues roots of these artists. In 1994, Sony presented a stunning two-CD 47-song set of McGhee’s 1940-41 pre-War recordings, The Complete Brownie McGhee (Columbia/Legacy C2K 52933), which effectively argued a case for McGhee as Blind Boy
Fuller’s musical heir and a major artist in his own right in the Piedmont blues style. In 1995, Capitol released Sonny Terry, Whoopin’ the Blues: the Capitol Recordings, 1947-1950 (Capitol Blues Collection CDP 7243 8 29372 27) and a double CD, Rediscovered Blues (Capitol Blues Collection CDP 7243 8 29378 23), which presented a dozen recordings Terry and McGhee made for World Pacific in 1959 along with a half dozen in which they appear in the company of Lightnin’ Hopkins and Big Joe Williams. And in 1996, Mr. Brownie & Mr. Sonny: The Bluesville Years Vol. 5 (Prestige PRCD-9913-2) reissued the 1960-62 Prestige/Bluesville recordings of the duo in their folk revival prime, including ‘live’ performances from a Philadelphia coffee house, the Second Fret, which Chris Smith, overviewing their recordings in a Blues & Rhythm feature, praises as the work of “a flawless team, supporting and pushing each other, and manipulating the audience with a careful mix of jokes and charm.”

With the benefit of hindsight, amplified by these striking reissues, it became clear to serious blues enthusiasts that, far from being irrelevant, Sonny and Brownie had been artists vital to the blues experience both within the African-American community from which they sprang and to the white audiences who embraced them during the folk boom. Their dismissal by blues purists was a textbook case of familiarity breeding contempt, and Brownie at least lived to see the enduring impact of his team acknowledged. At a 1994 80th birthday tribute at Yoshi’s Nitespot in McGhee’s adopted hometown of Oakland, Ed Pearl, founder of the legendary Los Angeles folk club The Ash Grove, said: “This is the man who opened the ears of people to the great poetry and music of the blues,” and went on to emphasize that Brownie and Sonny had paved the way among folk audiences for the likes of Mississippi John Hurt and other rediscoveries of the 1960s. They opened ears across the world, a fact borne out by Eric Clapton, who once said: “Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry acquainted everyone with the blues via the acoustic guitar.”

Walter Brown McGhee came to be acquainted with the guitar via his father, George Duffield ‘Duff’ McGhee. “Both sides of my family played musical instruments,” Brownie told Mark Greenberg (“Brownie McGhee: Blues Legend Who Won’t Quit,” Frets, July 1982), “but I was always around
my father more than anybody else, and I think his style rubbed off on me because he played with his natural fingers. My daddy forbade me to play with a straight pick, and he was absolutely against me playing with a slide. He told me, ‘If you want to play guitar, you’ve got to pick it.’ My thumb is another hand. My father always told me something should be happening on the guitar all the time.’” Born November 30, 1915 in Knoxville, Tennessee, Brownie was his parents’ third child and, he recalled, “I was pretty much worshipped because I was the first son” (Guitar Styles of Brownie McGhee, Oak Publications, 1971). He grew up around Kingsport and other rural areas where, he said, “the whites and the blacks played together most of the time,” and noted that his father often played dances with white musicians while some of his cousins “played pretty good hillbilly music.” Writing in his seminal study, The Country Blues (Rinehart & Co., 1959), Samuel B. Charters said of Eastern Tennessee: “There is little of the country Negro life that is found in the teeming ‘black belt’ in the cotton country to the south. Most of the Negroes in this part of Tennessee live in cities or small towns, doing the laboring and service jobs that keep the towns going.” Brownie would note with pride that his father helped build Kingsport, Tennessee.

“When I was about four or five I got what they called infantile paralysis,” Brownie told Cathy Signorelli (“Yesterday Is Today & Today Is Tomorrow: Brownie McGhee’s Blues Philosophy,” Sing Out! Vol. 40 # 3). It was also about this
time that his parents separated and the children were sent
to live with their grandmother for awhile. Later, Brownie lived
for four years with a staunchly religious aunt who deemed
the guitar “the devil’s work” and forbade him to play a banjo
he had made. Brownie played piano and sang in gospel
groups but by his late teens was on his own and free to
cultivate his affinity for his father’s instrument. An encoun-
ter with an itinerant blues guitarist from North Carolina was
a turning point: “I was very impressed with this guy,” Brownie
recalled, “and even though T.T. Carter was never known,
after he left I just fell in love with the guitar all of a sudden.”

Despite his poliomyelitis, Brownie was active and, at
20, graduated from Kingsport’s Frederick Douglas High
School (he was the class salutatorian) in 1936. The follow-
ing year, a March of Dimes-sponsored operation enabled
him to walk without crutches. After nine months of recov-
ery, Brownie recalled, “Instead of having my foot five inches
from the ground it’s an inch and a quarter...The doctor told
me, ‘Now throw those crutches away and go out in the world
and seek your fortune.’ I picked up the guitar and I haven’t
quit walking yet.”

He walked to his birthplace, Knoxville, where he worked
with washboard and harmonica bands and he walked on
further to the coal camps and tobacco towns of Virginia,
West Virginia and North Carolina. “I looked for money towns
where I knew they had paydays,” Brownie told Tim Schuller
(“Till I find My Way Back Home: The Lost Brownie McGhee
Interview,” Blues Access, Summer ’96). Accompanied by
harmonica player Eli Jordon Webb, Brownie arrived in
Burlington, North Carolina, where he struck unexpected
paydirt. “That’s where I met Blind Boy Fuller,” Brownie re-
called, “in J.B. Long’s store on West Daley Street.” By way
of local blues musicians Richard and Willie Trice and Buddy
Moss, McGhee was introduced to George ‘Red’ Washington
(AKA Bull City Red or Oh Red). ‘Red’ played washboard
with Blind Boy Fuller, for whom he also acted as lead boy,
and was informal blues talent scout for James Baxter Long,
a local white entrepreneur with a keen interest in ‘downhome’
talent, both black and white. Long directed his finds to the
American Record Company, and his association with Fuller,
begun in 1935, was his greatest success. But Long would
remember Brownie as “the smartest man I ever handled.”
Fuller, the established star, may have felt threatened by this
newcomer: “Brownie was a good guitar player and singer and Fuller realized that they might be competing with each other in the next few months,” wrote Charters. In later years, Brownie sometimes disparaged Fuller’s influence on him, but Lawrence Cohn recalled a 1958 interview in the notes to The Complete Brownie McGhee that contradicts this: “I remember him (Brownie) telling me that when he came to North Carolina from his home in Knoxville, he thought that as a guitar player he was the hottest thing going. That was until he encountered Blind Boy Fuller and thought perhaps he had to relearn how to play.” His 1940 trip to Burlington threw Brownie in the path of two men who would play key roles in his career, J.B. Long and Sonny Terry, who was about to embark on a recording trip with Blind Boy Fuller which would prove to be Fuller’s last session. “We were in Burlington...fixin’ to leave for Chicago when Red...brought Brownie around,” Sonny Terry told Tony Standish (“Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee,” Jazz Journal, 11, June 1958). “That was the first time I met Brownie.”

Sonny Terry would spend more than 40 years of his life in the spotlight, yet for such a public figure some basic facts of his life are in apparent doubt. His given name was either Saunders Terrell or Saunders Teddell; he was born October 24, 1911 in either Greensboro, Georgia or Greensboro, North Carolina. Bruce Bastin, a leading authority on Piedmont blues, gives Georgia in his 1971 book, Crying for the Carolines (Studio Vista, out-of-print) and North Carolina in 1986’s Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast (University of Illinois Press). Terry seemed to lend credence to the Georgia claim in an interview with Barry Elmes (Living Blues # 13, Summer 1973) when he recalled boyhood experiences playing on the streets in Georgia. In response to a question about living in North Carolina, Terry said: “I moved north of the line when I was about 15.”

Terry told Elmes he began playing harmonica when he was six years old, though his interest was piqued even younger. “When I was a little kid about three years old, y’know, my father used to play harmonica, so when I was about six he take me to town one day and I sees a fellow there playin’ harmonica. And man, I like to have jumped out of the wagon! I want to find and get that man! My father say, ‘Wait a minute, I’ll buy you one, boy. You can’t take his.’” In other accounts, Terry suggested that his father didn’t
make good on this offer, so he played his father’s harp on the sly: “I’d take a chair, reach up there (to the fireplace mantel) and get it. I’d have to put it back ‘cause he’d tear me up!” Terry’s farmer father used it to entertain at Saturday night fish fries: “He didn’t never do no blues,” Terry told Kent Cooper (The Harmonica Styles of Sonny Terry, New York; Oak Publications, 1975). I never heard no blues before I was about 18 years old. He done buckdances, reels and jigs, stuff as that you could dance to. He could play a harp with no hands, slide it along his lips.”

Two accidents led to Terry’s near-total blindness. The first occurred at either age five or eleven (as with his birthplace, accounts vary). While he was beating a stick on the kitchen table, a sliver broke off and lodged in one of his eyes. Some years later, someone struck him in the face with a chunk of iron, causing loss of much of his remaining sight. Bastin writes in Red River Blues: “Although he worked a little on his father’s farm—he could see just enough to plow a little when the cotton grew high—he really had only his music to fall back on.” In Kim Field’s Harmonicas, Harps and Heavy Breathers (Fireside, Simon & Schuster, 1993) Terry recalled: “I wouldn’t go out of the house because I was ashamed. The only thing I had any interest in was playing my harmonica, and I kept on it night and day...In them days I just as soon died--except for my harmonica. It was a friend who didn’t give a damn if I could see or not.” Terry was housebound the better part of two years.

He began venturing out in his teens, playing around Shelby, North Carolina with various guitar, banjo and fiddle players. His specialty was “John Henry,” and he even appeared on radio around Gastonia and Charlotte with blues guitarists whose featured favorites included “Red River Blues.” Terry began playing in the streets and around factories and warehouses “on Fridays and Saturdays when people get paid you know,” he told Elmes. “They throw me quarters...I wore a cap and I laid my cap out. I said, ‘Throw it in that cap and be sure to lay it there.’ I ‘d have that cap full of money, y’know. I made more money than people made working that week!” Despite the Depression, Terry was doing alright: “I’d go out Friday and make $7 or $8, y’know. You could get an apartment for about $12 a month...along in the 1930s...”

He traveled with medicine shows and, like his future
partner, Brownie McGhee, ‘followed the paydays’ through small towns in the Carolinas. A visit to his brother in Wadesboro, North Carolina led to Terry meeting Blind Boy Fuller, whose sisters lived there. “I was playin’ on one side of the street and he was on the other side,” Terry told Elmes. “So I heard that whinin’ guitar over there wailin’ y’know. And he saw me over there....So me and him got together; that was about 3:00. We played til about 6:00, and...he told me, he said, ‘Come to Durham, North Carolina.’ Said we may get to make a record together.” In Durham Fuller introduced Terry to J.B. Long, and the two blind musicians made the first of many recordings together in December 1937. (Terry’s first recording session also occasioned his first trip to his future home, New York City.)

Terry was a presence on Fuller’s recording sessions through the final one in June 1940. If a 1939 letter (reproduced in Bastin’s Red River Blues) from J.B. Long to a welfare worker is indicative, Terry in his accompanist’s role might hope to get $25 from a recording session compared to Fuller’s $225. He supplemented his income playing on the streets, selling liquor and working in a factory for the blind, making mattresses, baskets and chairs. But only a year after his first recordings with Fuller, Terry found himself performing at Carnegie Hall! The occasion was the legendary Spirituals to Swing concert, an event John Hammond described in his autobiography (John Hammond On Record) as “a concert in New York which would bring together for the first time, before a musically sophisticated audience, Negro music from its raw beginnings to the latest jazz. The concert should include...country blues singers and shouters.” Hammond singled out Fuller as an exemplary country blues shouter and, after contacting Long, set out for North Carolina to meet him. Fuller, however, was in jail, so Hammond turned his attention to “a blind harmonica player named Sonny Terry,” he recalled, “and as soon as we heard him play and shout his unique songs we decided he was a far superior performer. He definitely should be brought to New York for the concert.” In the company of everyone from Benny Goodman to Big Joe Turner, Terry made his Carnegie Hall debut on December 23, 1938. The day after the concert (remembered by Terry as “a killer”), Alan Lomax recorded him for the Library of Congress. He also made two sides for Columbia as Sanders Terry, Harmonica Player, is
sued, oddly, in Columbia’s classical series! Despite his triumph in New York City, Terry wasn’t yet ready to settle there. “It was a real nice concert,” he would say more than 30 years after Spirituals to Swing. “People yelled and clapped and went crazy over the music. Afterwards, me and Bull City Red took a bus back down to Durham. I commenced doing what I had always done, playing in the streets and at house parties and selling liquor.”

Nothing much changed when Brownie McGhee first appeared on the scene in 1940. Fuller was the local blues star and Terry was his primary sideman, a role emphasized on a 1940 OKeh 78 by, the label stated, ‘Sonny Terry (Blind Boy Fuller’s Harmonica Player).’ McGhee was still working with harmonica player Eli Jordan Webb, and Fuller reined in McGhee’s ego, telling him, “Man, you can sing, but you can’t play the guitar.” J.B. Long thought otherwise, though his initial attempts at selling McGhee met with resistance: OKeh’s response from Chicago, McGhee recalled, was: “Don’t bother sending him up here, we’ve got enough of them five-bit blues singers.” But Long persisted, and in August of 1940 Brownie made his first recordings in Chicago. His debut release was issued as one side of a release by the well-known Fuller; ironically, Fuller’s last recordings and McGhee’s first were coupled. OKeh 05785 appeared in September 1940 with McGhee’s “Picking My Tomatoes” (a re-
working of Washboard Sam’s “Diggin’ My Potatoes”) backed by Fuller’s “Night Rambling Woman.”

At the time, Fuller had less than five months to live. Long may have known Fuller was seriously ill and one can surmise that introducing Brownie on Fuller’s discs was a means of making the future ‘Blind Boy Fuller No. 2’ known to Fuller’s fans. In May 1941, three months after Fuller’s death, McGhee used Fuller’s steel-bodied National guitar on the double-sided tribute, “Death of Blind Boy Fuller.” Such posthumous tributes to popular blues singers weren’t unprecedented (there were several for Blind Lemon Jefferson); nor were attempts to promote a surrogate to fill a commercial void (Amos Easton, AKA Bumble Bee Slim, became Leroy Carr’s Buddy on the 1935 tribute, “The Death of Leroy Carr”). Long’s promotion of McGhee was apparently effective: “When ‘Blind Boy Fuller No. 2’ was hooked onto me,” Brownie told Happy Traum, “I made a tour to promote my record. The company (OKeh) gave me $300 and 5,000 of these throwaways (flyers) of mine....and I got very popular in the areas where he (Fuller) was selling.”

Inevitably, Long would suggest ‘Blind Boy Fuller No. 2’ record with ‘Blind Boy Fuller’s Harmonica Player,’ Sonny Terry. Their long recording career together was launched in New York on October 22, 1941.

The last song from ‘Blind Boy Fuller No. 2’s’ October 1941 session, “Swing, Soldier, Swing,” lightheartedly suggested the looming wartime experience for which America had then girded its loins. The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 initiated a chain of events which virtually ended commercial recording for much of the War and dramatically dropped the curtain on the pre-War era of blues recording. It might also have been the end of the McGhee-Terry team if not for a 1942 request, probably by either Alan Lomax or John Hammond, for Terry to appear at a concert in Washington D.C. on a bill with Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. Terry recalled: “Brownie wasn’t doing nothing then so old J.B. Long told him to go along to help look after me, and maybe if they heard him they’d take him, too.” The trip brought an opportunity to record for the Library of Congress with an artist who would house them in future, Leadbelly. It also brought McGhee and Terry into contact with Millard Lampell of the activist Almanac Singers. Lampell invited them to come to New York, saying, “We
need fellows like you to play the blues.” Brownie thought there was little potential audience for his music in New York but gave Lampell his address anyway before returning to Tennessee. A month later, a bus ticket arrived along with a telegram: COME AT ONCE. SONNY’S HERE.

In 1943, Brownie and Sonny found themselves encamped in the heart of Greenwich Village in Almanac House, the communal digs they shared for a time with the likes of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. “They had awnings between the beds,” Brownie recalled. “One bathroom and one toilet.” Aside from folk song and ‘one world’ optimism, the Almanacs subsisted, Brownie recalled, on eggs and pumpernickel bread. Leadbelly could see their discomfort in this situation and invited the two displaced bluesmen to move in with him and his wife, Martha. Leadbelly’s lower East Side house was more private but no less bristling with varied visitors, musical and otherwise: “He had Italian friends, Jewish friends, white friends—he had all types of people at his house,” Brownie recalled (The Life & Legend of Leadbelly by Charles Wolfe & Kip Lornell, Harper Perennial 1992). It was a vastly different world from Tennessee and North Carolina, and though they had passed through New York on previous recording trips, this time Brownie and Sonny were living in the midst of a musical and social movement at its peak. Typically, they seized the moment.
Following the disintegration of the Almanac Singers, Woody Guthrie enlisted them in ‘Woody Guthrie’s Headline Singers.’ Their close association with Guthrie and Leadbelly introduced Brownie and Sonny to Moses Asch, who had started his Asch label in 1939 and had begun recording Leadbelly in 1941. Asch would first record Sonny in 1944 and Brownie soon followed. They performed at ‘hootenannies’ with such varied folk artists as Aunt Molly Jackson and Burl Ives and they played political events with Woody, who always made an impression. Writing in Woody Guthrie: A Life (Ballantine Books, 1980), Joe Klein relates a famous incident: “In Baltimore, after they performed for a fraternal organization—Woody happily, provocatively sandwiched between his two black partners onstage—Sonny and Brownie were led off to a special ‘Negroes Only’ table and Woody was told he couldn’t eat dinner with them. ‘I just sang with them,’ he protested.

“Well, it’s different here than in New York,’ one of the hosts replied, huffily. “Woody quietly told Brownie to start leading Sonny out of the hall and he’d meet them at the train station. Then he calmly walked across to the long buffet table with all the food piled up on it and tossed it over without a word, and was out of there before anyone realized what had happened.”

“I was with Woody a lot of the time,” Brownie told Mark Greenberg, “because he used to come to Harlem and spend the night, enjoy life. We’d go places, sit down and play. Jack Elliott—the same way. A lot of those fellows used to come up and join my group in Harlem with (piano player) Jack Dupree and myself. We used to have mixed bands there. There was no trouble.”

In Harlem, Sonny and Brownie often played on the streets as they had done in the Carolinas, and soon they were attempting to reach African-American audiences on record as well. In 1944, they made their first recordings for the pioneering New York Rhythm & Blues ‘indie’ label Savoy. In tandem or independently, Brownie and Sonny made a plethora of recordings over the next decade for a variety of labels marketed to African-American buyers, among them Alert, Sittin’ In With, J ax, Gotham, Harlem, and Groove. Sonny was the more immediately engaging but stylistically limited performer. Brownie was more adaptable to changing musical trends. “The folk-blues phobics were usually
unaware that in the 1940s and 1950s McGhee had pursued a successful career in New York making tough R&B recordings that were aimed squarely at black purchasers,” writes Chris Smith (“A Wholesale Dealin’ Papa—Brownie McGhee at 80,” Blues & Rhythm #105, December 1995). “With electric guitar, saxes and rocking piano, these are a fine body of work, and Brownie was not without his share of hits: the suave ‘My Fault,’ with Hal Singer on tenor, was a massive seller, and the romping ‘Baseball Boogie’ spawned follow-ups in ‘New Baseball Boogie’ and ‘Robbie Doby Boogie,’ in praise of black players Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby.”

Meanwhile, Sonny, on whom fortune cast some unlikely smiles, was written a featured role in Finian’s Rainbow, which opened on Broadway in January 1947 and ran for 725 performances, followed by ten months on the road. Brownie formed a guitar/piano/washboard trio called the Three Bs and then, more in keeping with the times, a quartet with saxophone, bass, and drums called the Mighty House Rockers. (He played electric guitar in this group.) In 1948, he opened The Home of the Blues on 125th Street. “I did that for five, six years and had a lot of students,” McGhee told Tim Schuller. “Blind Gary (Davis) used to teach there. Most of the thing was to teach people the blues pattern, how to get lyrics together to tell a story in rhyme, and I give ‘em a chance to present themselves before the public. I had a little auditorium in there. I’d put on little programs there, charge 50 cents a head, maybe a dollar, and we didn’t do too bad.”

Brownie and Sonny were obviously survivors. “We were partners,” Brownie told Cathy Signorelli. “Our deal was he’d carry my weight and I’d see for him. But I wanted two voices and two instruments. This was a hard stretch for Sonny because he couldn’t sing with the harmonica. He never sang with Fuller, he just did his whoopin.’” However limited, Sonny’s wildly enthusiastic ‘whoopin’ was novel enough to land him roles on Broadway while Brownie scuffled, one likely cause of the rancor between them. “Me and Sonny had a little difference,” Brownie told Barry Elmes, “(when) Sonny went in to a show (Finian’s Rainbow).” Still, they knew the sum of them was greater than their separate parts, and it was as a ‘dynamic duo’ that they both appeared in the cast of Tennessee Williams’s Cat On a Hot Tin Roof, which opened on Broadway in March 1955 and ran for nearly two
years. Around this time Brownie and Sonny made their last recordings for small ‘indies’ which aimed their releases primarily at African-American buyers. That audience no longer bought country blues, though Moe Asch was always glad to record Brownie and Sonny for his Folkways label. Their steady stream of ‘folk blues’ releases, coupled with a presence on Broadway, gave the duo a visibility which soon positioned them as popular harbingers of the passion for country blues which trailed in the wake of the late 1950s folk boom.

The European appetite for country blues had been whetted by Big Bill Broonzy, who was last able to tour abroad in 1957. Brownie and Sonny stepped in to fill the void left by Broonzy’s 1958 passing: “A few months before Bill’s (August 1958) death the blues duo of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry had visited London for the first time,” writes Bob Groom (The Blues Revival, Studio Vista, out-of-print). “Sonny and Brownie and Big Bill were great friends and often played together when Bill was in New York. It was natural that they would eventually follow in his footsteps and visit Europe. On their May 1958 tour they appeared with Chris Barber’s Jazz Band and were an instant success.” They would also be hits at the first Newport Folk Festival in July 1959, at which they were the sole blues artists. And as that year ended, the State Department sponsored Brownie and Sonny on a tour of India.

The 1960s ushered in the third decade of the duo’s professional association and with it opportunities to play endless concerts and festivals around the globe. Though they fast approached Social Security age, Brownie and Sonny continued to tirelessly “Walk On” well into the 1970s. Writing in Living Blues of a series of shows at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada in 1972, Barry Elmes noted each night’s show was varied: “Sonny’s comparatively rough vocal style makes an effective contrast to Brownie’s lighter style. The work load is split right in half...each one is featured about the same number of times as the other in the show.

“At Waterloo they played each night’s performance according to whatever mood they were in at the time, and the resulting music was nothing less than great blues: warm spontaneous, and genuine.”

“Me and Sonny had a hell of a formula,” Brownie told
Cathy Signorelli. "Nobody ever figured it out. It's like simple math; once you know the formula, you can do it for a long time. We did it for 35 years. It was this: two wrongs make a right provided you make your wrongs at the same time. If one person can't play eight-bar blues, but can only come up with seven-bar blues, then his partner can only make it right by playing seven-bar blues, even though seven-bar blues ain't quite right. And that was our formula. We didn't need to rehearse. With that, we played in every state in the U.S. and we played all around the world." Sonny Terry's long journey ended on March 12, 1986 in New York City. Brownie McGhee died February 18, 1996 in Oakland, his home since 1964. On November 19, 1996, the Oakland City Council unanimously declared that Brownie's home be given a plaque signifying its 'landmark' status.
The Performances

Our collection opens with a fascinating 1940s simulation of a field recording session. This Library of Congress footage, circa 1948, shows the McGhee-Terry team to already be an assured, professional duo. “Red River Blues” is one of the songs most associated with the Southeastern or Piedmont blues. Early in 1938, the obscure Virgil Childers recorded “Red River Blues” at a session in Charlotte, North Carolina for Bluebird, and Fuller’s 1937 ARC waxing, “Untrue Blues,” used the same tune. Brownie told Happy Traum that “Red River Blues” was “the first blues I ever heard my father play, and I picked up on it and recorded it. ‘Key to the Highway’ came from ‘Red River.’ In fact, a lot of the standard blues came from those old songs that he used to sing.” Brownie and Sonny first recorded “Red River” for Stinson in 1946.

The second piece (also from the 1940s) shows Brownie and Sonny accompanying Woody Guthrie on “John Henry,” another song Brownie learned from his father and a venerable one now at least a century old; it first appeared in print in a 1909 Journal of American Folklore article titled “Ballads and Songs of Western North Carolina.” The narrator’s voice in this ‘train song’ segment is that of Pete Seeger.

Seeger’s Rainbow Quest is the source of the three 1966 performances. “Easy Rider” is a folk blues associated with the Southwest rather than the Southeast: archetypal Texas bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson recorded a version of it in
the 1920s, though the version Leadbelly waxed in 1940 is more akin to what Sonny and Brownie perform. Their friendship with Leadbelly (with whom they recorded a version of this in 1946) may account for their having “Easy Rider” in their repertoire. The Martin D–18 Brownie plays was a gift (circa 1958) from actor Andy Griffith, with whom he appeared in the film A Face in the Crowd.

The next two songs are McGhee compositions which illustrate contrasting sides of his personality. “Fighting a Losing Battle” is a blues with all the tightly-crafted symmetry of a pop song. In his 1972 interview with Barry Elmes, Brownie said one of the goals of his late-1940s ‘Home of the Blues’ school had been “to develop black singers on how to construct a blues song to tell a story. I always believed in telling a story without getting lost on three or four different things involved. Some blues are written with...no continuity to it!” That was never a problem for Brownie, even when weaving a bizarre fable like “Couldn’t Believe My Eyes,” a showcase both for his lyrical imagination and the ragtime-influenced guitar style of the Southeast.

The four 1970 performances once again balance traditional material with McGhee originals. The medley of “Red River Blues/Crow Jane” pairs two of the oldest ‘standards’ of Piedmont blues (Julius Daniels waxed the first known “Crow Jane” back in 1927), songs which Brownie and Sonny probably both knew long before they met. (They first recorded “Crow Jane” for Capitol in 1947.) “Backwater Blues,” as Brownie notes in his introduction, was recorded by Bessie Smith in February 1927 and by Lonnie Johnson in May of that year. McGhee often cited Johnson as his biggest influence, and told Tim Schuller: “I always admired Lonnie’s playing and I admire his lyrics.”

Brownie’s own philosophical and autobiographical lyrics are the standout features of “Life Is a Gamble” and “My Father’s Words.” McGhee would always recall ‘Duff’ McGhee with great affection: “Daddy didn’t treat me any different than the others, just because I was crippled,” he told Cathy Signorelli. “He told me I was the same as my brother.”

Two of the three 1973 BBC/Old Grey Whistle Test performances throw the spotlight on Sonny Terry. “Walking My Blues Away” is essentially the song Terry’s former partner, Blind Boy Fuller, recorded as “Walking My Troubles Away” in 1936 (reissued on Blind Boy Fuller: East Coast Piedmont
Style, Columbia/Legacy CK 46777). “Whoopin’ the Blues” is Sonny’s eternal showpiece: he recorded it at his first Capitol session in 1947 and Whoopin’ (Alligator AL 4734) was the title of one of his last albums, a late-1970s venture which placed him in the company of Johnny Winter and Willie Dixon.

Terry was the last popular purveyor of a rural mimetic harmonica-and-vocal style widespread among both white and black performers in the 1920s. (Henry Whitter’s 1923 recording, “Old Time Fox Chase,” was the first of many “Whoopin’”–related waxings.) A 1950s press release for Sonny and Brownie said: “Sonny Terry learned to add that certain something that made his music—or music as it seemed to him—complete. ‘Dogs run the fox, and I used to listen to that barkin’—ketch a whole lot of ideas f’um that.’ And there were trains. Both the Seaboard Air Line and the Southern Railroad went through near Sonny’s home: ‘Mockin’ the trains ‘bout the first piece I learned...I used to hear the freight train comin’ by. I used to be gettin’ down sometime, by myself real still and I’d say, ‘I wish I could play that.’” By the late 1950s, his wish had come true to such an extent that classical music critic Alfred Frankenstein enthused in The San Francisco Chronicle: “His voice is huge, dark, rough, and gorgeous, but what counts most is the way he races around on that little harmonica, gets a complete orchestral gamut of sound from its reeds, makes a swell box for the mouth organ with his fluttering free hand, and improvises some of the most enthusiastically descriptive tone poems of modern times. His ‘Fox Chase’ (‘Whoopin’) is as famous as ‘Till Eulenspiegel,’ and justly so.” “Walk On,” a McGhee original, had become a signature song for the duo by the time of this 1973 performance. They first recorded it for English Columbia in London in 1959.

The last four performances here were made for the BBC in 1974, by which time Sonny was over 60 and Brownie wasn’t far behind him. Yet, as the upbeat “Ride, Ride, Ride” illustrates, there was no evidence of flagging energy or coasting as the team continued to do in essence what they had then been doing together for over 30 years. Sonny is the featured artist on “I’m a Burnt Child,” first recorded at an unissued 1965 Smash label session in Canada. Next, Brownie’s ‘autobiography in blues’ continues with “Born With the Blues,” a song he debuted on English Columbia in 1959.
Finally, this Brownie and Sonny retrospective closes with a dynamic performance of “Rock Island Line,” a piece their old friend Leadbelly had learned from an Arkansas prison work gang on a 1934 song collecting trip with John Lomax. “Rock Island Line” would become a folk standard via Leadbelly, and it even became a pop hit for ‘skiffle’ king Lonnie Donegan in 1956 and a lesser country hit for Johnny Cash in 1970. But to legions who enjoyed their performances across the world from the 1950s through the 1970s, “Rock Island Line” will forever be associated with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee.

– Mark Humphrey

For invaluable help with background material, many thanks to Mary Katherine Aldin.
For some 30 years, they embodied ‘country blues’ for folk music audiences around the globe. Sonny Terry (1911-1986) and Brownie McGhee (1915-1996) were once ubiquitous, and as such tended to be taken for granted in the halcyon days of the 1960s blues rediscoveries. But nearly two decades have passed since the perennial team parted, and the 16 performances here remind us of this superb duo’s complementary strengths: Sonny the archetypal country blues harmonica player, whooping and ‘fox chasing’ in a style old as any known; Brownie the more urbane (but no less passionate) exemplar of the Southeast’s Piedmont-style blues, a stunning guitarist and singer. Together they proved that a sense of showmanship refined on New York stages needn’t be at odds with the elemental energies of country blues.

This video career retrospective begins with two pieces filmed for the Library of Congress in 1948, including a rendition of John Henry with Woody Guthrie. Pete Seeger appears as appreciative host to the duo for two songs from his Rainbow Quest. A wonderful medley filmed in 1970 of Red River Blues/Crow Jane offers two of the oldest known pieces in the Piedmont blues repertoire. Sonny’s signature harmonica showpiece, Whoopin’ the Blues is heard in a 1973 BBC performance, and a tour de force Rock Island Line closes this exciting survey of a duo who, more than anyone else, introduced a generation to the power and glory of country blues.


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