

A black and white photograph of two elderly men wearing cowboy hats. The man on the left is playing an acoustic guitar and looking towards the right. The man on the right is leaning in, looking down at the guitar. The background is a patterned curtain with a leaf design.

**Roots  
Stuff**

**The Roots of  
Texas Blues Guitar**



## The Roots of Texas Blues Guitar

Although Mississippi has received much credit as "where the blues began," the truth is, blues music broke out all over the South simultaneously, wherever there were cotton fields and slave trade. The human voice was probably the first instrument. Later came fiddles,\* the most universally available instrument at that time, sometimes banjos and other home-made instruments and, much later, cheap Spanish-style guitars in the 1880's and 1890's.

A few of Texas' musical pioneers began recording in Dallas and San Antonio in the 1920's. The legacy of Blind Lemon Jefferson, the most popular and influential of all the country bluesmen, only hints at a rich Texas tradition of country blues as played on guitar. For every familiar name, such as Jefferson, Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, "Lightin'" Sam Hopkins, Little Son Jackson, Texas Alexander, Funny Paper Smith, Henry "Ragtime" Thomas, are countless players who never saw the inside of a recording studio.

This recording presents the heart's blood of those anonymous Texas bluesmen who labored by day and played music by night—men and women who worked the cotton fields or compresses, sharecroppers, oilfield workers—men and women who struggled for survival during the week and on the weekends supplied the music for the houses where you could dance, court, eat, drink, and gamble for two bits, maybe a dime or nickel, or whatever you had. Sometimes the music was provided by a single guitar player who would literally play all night. Sometimes there was help from a second guitar, a fiddle, maybe a French harp or somebody banging on spoons or anything else available to keep time, exploring not only blues but also break-downs, stomps, slow drags, schottishes, and waltzes for dancers at country suppers or house rent parties.

From the late 1800's until the early 1940's country blues flourished. Then it was changed forever by electricity. Many of these bluesmen, out in the country and sometimes on city streets, continued playing on into the 1960's in the old country style—even though they had been replaced in the

juke joints by electric bands and juke boxes. When these artists were recorded in 1964, 1965, and 1966, they were already older men. Their music, "out of style" with younger audiences, sometimes reflects their age, but their essential vigor can still be heard.

Country blues guitar will die with these men. The only two players here alive today are in their mid-eighties. When they are gone there will be no more. The music on this record is the last to be heard from the original generation that spawned city blues, electric blues, jazz, and rock-and-roll.

There's much talk today of "roots" music, but these—the country blues—are the TRUE roots. Everyone who followed, who plays blues, jazz, or rock-and-roll, owes an enormous debt to the creators of what is now called America's only native art form. Country blues guitar soon will be performed by the few white and black players who understand and appreciate the value of this musical tradition.

These songs were recorded in Central Texas on a Roberts quarter-track recorder on front porches and in kitchens and living rooms. The music is not polished; the voices and playing

reflect hard lives lived in a harsh, hostile, racist environment, trying to have a little joy, get a little release when work was done and the evening breeze would dissipate the blistering heat of a Texas summer day. To shake it down, to move your hips, to look around and laugh and smile, to forget for a while—this was the goal of these bluesmen. Listen closely, this won't come again.



*Nathaniel "Bill" Barnes*

## Notes

**1. JACK OF DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY** The standard for Texas-style knife or slide-style playing. I never met anyone of the first generation that didn't play

this piece. Recorded by Blind Lemon Jefferson, it was probably in circulation long before. It is one of the very few secular songs in Texas played slide or knife-style which most players used only on religious songs. Players said the slide had a "heavenly" sound. I've also heard it played on the fiddle.\* Nathaniel "Bill" Barnes. Recorded October 9, 1965, Austin. Arrangement Nathaniel "Bill" Barnes; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

2. **OUT AND DOWN** The quintessential Texas blues, played by every player with many variations, sometimes distinctly separate songs. Often called one of the earliest Texas blues, and known to many players as "Old Out and Down," the thumb and finger style of rhythmic picking predates the blues. Lee Mackey. Recorded October, 1964, Austin. Arrangement Lee Mackey; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

3. **JAY BIRD BLUES** A very popular tune recorded in various versions by Lightnin' Hopkins and others. This style, often attributed to Lightnin', was originated earlier and was developed by many players throughout central Texas. Lee Mackey. Recorded October, 1964,

Austin. Arrangement Lee Mackey; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

4. **IF I GET LUCKY, MAMA** This song blends juke joint lyrics with an ancient field falsetto to create a unique and mesmerizing sound. Willie Menifee, harp and vocal; Mance Lipscomb, guitar. Recorded August 1, 1965, Navasota. Arrangement Willie Menifee and Mance Lipscomb; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

5. **ANGEL CHILD** Another popular classic given a singular performance by Mance Lipscomb. Recorded August 1, 1965, Navasota. Mance Lipscomb; Tradition Music, BMI.

6. **RECONSIDER BABY** An excellent example of a popular modern blues written by Lowell Fulsom assimilated by a country blues artist and returned to the old-time tradition. The fiddler is Teodar (T' Oley) Jackson\* of Austin. Recorded at a party in Austin, August 22, 1965. Lowell Fulsom, ARC Music; BMI.

7. **MATCHBOX BLUES** Attributed to the pioneering Blind Lemon Jefferson, hit recordings by Carl Perkins and even the Beatles show the enormous influence of Jefferson on music around the world. Bill Neely,

guitar and vocal; Powell St. John, harp; John Moyer, bass. Recorded April 26, 1965, Austin. Blind Lemon Jefferson; † Canepole Music, BMI.

8. **GRAVE YARD BLUES** Bill Neely's adaptation of a popular 1920's blues song shows again how "city" blues can return to the rural blues tradition. Bill Neely, guitar and vocal; Powell St. John, harp; John Moyer, bass. Recorded April 26, 1965, Austin. Arrangement Bill Neely; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

9. **WHAT'S WRONG BABY** Bill Barnes describes this blues as the earliest song he learned to play in the mid-1920's around Trinity, Texas, from his cousin, Jimmy Hamilton. The later verses refer to his association with Lightin' Hopkins. Many players such as those in the Trinity Bottoms used "What's Wrong Baby" as a theme song. Nathaniel "Bill" Barnes. Recorded October 9, 1965, Austin. Arrangement Nathaniel Barnes; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

10. **WORRIED BLUES** This is an early standard played by many musicians throughout the South.

The banjo-like arrangement hints at a very early origin. The instrument is a steel-bodied National guitar. Babe Stovall. Recorded August 26, 1965, Austin. Arrangement Babe Stovall; Traditional † Canepole Music, BMI.

11. **DIRTY MISTREATER** This is Babe Stovall's version of the Tommy Johnson classic "Big Road Blues," which Babe said was one of his oldest pieces. Babe Stovall. Recorded August 26, 1965, Austin. Arrangement Babe Stovall; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

12. **OUT AND DOWN** This instrumental is yet another melody variation of what the players call "The Old Out and Down." T. J. Jackson, guitar. Recorded March 6, 1965, Austin. Arrangement T. J. Jackson; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

13. **CORRINA CORRINA** An instrumental version of a blues classic played on electric guitar but in the country blues style. Many early players attribute the song to the Gulf coast area, but it is found throughout the South and has been one of the most recorded songs in blues history well into the rock-

and-roll era. T.J. Jackson, electric guitar. Recorded August 22, 1965, Austin. Arrangement T.J. Jackson; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

**14. BROKE AND AIN'T GOT A DIME** Another early guitar piece played throughout Texas and another relative of "Out and Down," yet a completely distinct song. Oscar "Preacher" Nelson, guitar and vocal; Newton "Hoss" Nelson, guitar. Recorded April 16, 1966. Arrangement

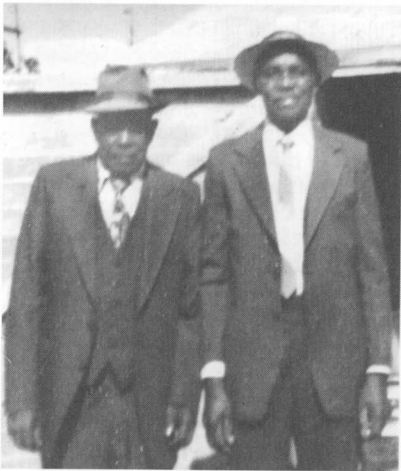


PHOTO: TARY OWENS

Oscar "Preacher" Nelson and  
Newton "Hoss" Nelson

Newton Nelson; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

**15. ALCOHOL BLUES** A common title, this version is unique, and Oscar "Preacher" Nelson's harsh vocal combined with the loose yet driving arrangement of the two guitars is singularly moving. Newton "Hoss" Nelson plays the "lead" part. Oscar "Preacher" Nelson, guitar and vocal; Newton "Hoss" Nelson, guitar. Recorded April 16, 1966. Arrangement Oscar Nelson and Newton Nelson; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

**16. WEST TEXAS BLUES** This fragment of a tune is not the same "West Texas Blues" as played by Mance Lipscomb, Little Son Jackson, or many others. The power of the simple riff with its distinct "Texas" feel propelled countless dancers and their partners in "one-room country shacks" on Saturday nights to forget their troubles until dawn. Jimmy Nelson. Recorded August 12, 1965, Rosharon. Arrangement Jimmy Nelson; traditional; † Canepole Music, BMI.

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**Nathaniel "Bill" Barnes** was born in Deloda, Mississippi, in 1909. At the age of one he moved to Lovelady, Texas, where he learned to play by listening at country suppers. He grew up around the Hopkins brothers, Sam, "Lightin'," Joel, and John Henry, near Centerville. He moved to Houston in the 1940's, and played blues as well as singing with a popular gospel quartet, The SilverGate Singers. Barnes was still playing blues on Lyons Avenue in the heart of Houston's Fifth Ward as recently as 1991--perhaps Texas' last street bluesman. He still resides in Houston and has recently recorded again.

Born in Austin in 1900, **Lee Mackey** worked in a tire store on South Congress Avenue, and was recorded in his kitchen in East Austin. Other local players who knew him as "Old Man Mackey" say that he died in the late 1970's.

**Willie Meniffee** is a singer and harmonica player from Navasota who was forty-two years old when he recorded at Mance Lipscomb's house, accompanied on the guitar by Mr. Lipscomb. He is believed to be living in the Bryan-College

Station area.

**Mance Lipscomb**, born in 1895 near Navasota, Texas, was the master of Texas country blues and a magnificent songster who played many older styles such as ragtime, slow drags, break downs, minstrel songs, and popular numbers that predate blues. Many regard him as the finest guitarist of his generation and a genuinely warm, gracious and gentle man who influenced everyone from Bob Dylan to Taj Majal. He is the best example of those who worked from "can til can't," played music all night, then went back to work all day again. Mr. Lipscomb is one of only three artists here who made commercial records. He was 65 years old when he was first recorded by Mack McCormick and Chris Strachwitz for Arhoolie in 1960.

**Bill Neely** was born near McKinney, Texas, in 1916, and learned to play from street musicians around infamous "Ellum" Street in Dallas, and Jimmie Rogers. A rare first generation white bluesman, he worked in both the white and black musical traditions. In

Austin by the 1940's, he became a close friend of Mance Lipscomb, with whom he played often. He was also associated for many years with Austin music patriarch Kenneth Threadgill, whom he often backed. Bill recorded one LP for Arhoolie Records, Blackland Farmboy. Here he is accompanied by Powell St. John on harmonica and John Moyer on bass, both playing at the time in Kenneth Threadgill's band. St. John went on to co-lead the San Francisco R&B group Mother Earth and to write popular tunes for Janis Joplin, The Thirteenth Floor Elevators, Boz Skaggs, and others. Bill Neely died in Austin in 1990 after completing his first European tour.

**Jewel "Babe" Stovall** was no Texan. Born in 1907 in Tylertown, Mississippi, he was associated with such Mississippi pioneers as Tommy Johnson. He moved to New Orleans in the 1950's where he spent most of the rest of his life playing on the streets. He recorded LP's released on Verve and Rounder Records. Jerry Jeff Walker wrote his famous song "Mr. Bojangles: about Stovall,

whom he met in a New Orleans jail and followed around the streets of New Orleans. While in Texas he met and played with Texas musicians Mance Lipscomb and Teodar (T'Oley) Jackson. Recorded in Austin, Texas, these tunes are part of the same recorded body of work as the rest of the songs representing how musicians from different areas carried their music and influences to other regions. Babe Stovall died in 1974 in New Orleans.

**T. J. Jackson** was from the Austin area and was the son of fiddler Teodar Jackson whom he usually accompanied. His finger picking style reflects the thumb and finger variations of many black and white players. T. J. Jackson died in 1988.

The Nelson Brothers, **Oscar "Preacher" Nelson** and **Newton "Hoss" Nelson**, came from Cameron, Texas, where they played for country suppers and dances until 1935 when they ceased playing in public for the next thirty years. Their songs reflect the roughest of the Texas tradition on stomping country blues. Both brothers played guitar,



and Oscar also played fiddle. The vocal is by Oscar Nelson who died in 1982. Newton "Hoss" Nelson, now 85, still lives in Cameron but no longer plays.

**Jimmy Nelson** was recorded in his home in Rosharon, Texas, southwest of Houston. He had not played for many years, and this

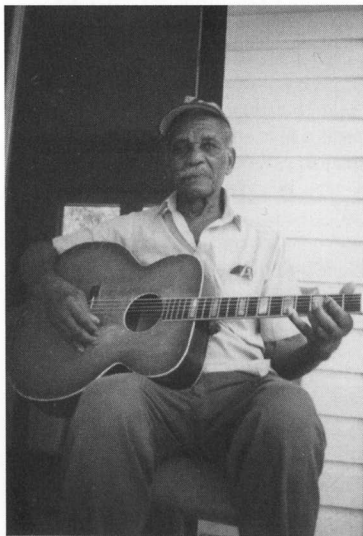


PHOTO: TARY OWENS

*Newton "Hoss" Nelson*

fragment of a piece was all he could remember. . . but what a solid piece of memory! No more is known of Jimmy Nelson.

- \* The Texas African-American fiddling tradition featuring Teodar Jackson, "Preacher" Nelson, and Tommy Wright will be released as Blues Come to Texas: African-American Fiddle Music, Catfish 1005.
- Mance Lipscomb at Home in Texas will be released as Catfish 1004.

### **ALSO AVAILABLE FROM CATFISH RECORDS:**

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### **CATFISH RECORDS**

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COURTESY: AUSTIN HISTORY MUSEUM

*String Band Juneteenth Austin, Texas 1900*

Producer: Tary Owens and Willie Owens

Tape Editing: Jim Watts for GEM/  
LONESTAR Studios

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