

MR. JOHNSON'S BLUES

Excerpted from The Guitar Players by James Sallis © 1982

In 1944 Bruce Cook went with his father to a concert sponsored by the Hot Club of Chicago, a program of traditional jazz in the old New Orleans style. The father was a serious jazzman who never made much money at it but played occasionally and practiced over an hour each day, running scales and jamming with records by Bix Beiderbecke, Red Nichols and Louis Armstrong. Ten-year-old Bruce had already found, at the bottom of the drawer, a small stack of records quite different from the ones his father listened to, ruder and more primitive, tunes from people like Tampa Red, Bessie Smith, Cow Cow Davenport. But this was Bruce's first encounter with a bluesman live.

Almost thirty years later, in *Listen to the Blues*, Cook described it.

His name was Lonnie Johnson and he was the real thing. ... I remember my own impression in listening to him was that it would be hard to imagine anybody playing better. There is a quality that the real virtuoso communicates, an added dimension to his playing, that makes it immediately and recognizably distinct from that of one who is merely proficient. Lonnie Johnson had it that day, and he may always have had it, for Pops Foster, though then hardly more than a boy, remembered him as "the only guy we had around New Orleans who could play jazz guitar. he was great on guitar. Django Reinhardt was a great jazz player like Johnson." And here he was, at fifty, playing deep rolls and treble runs that he extended with amazing subtlety, torturing out the last nuance of melody from all those simple blues chords.

But the blues is essentially a vocal art, and Lonnie Johnson was preeminently a blues singer. I remember his voice as hushed and rather insinuating in tone; he was a singer with a style that managed to say more than words alone might allow. He was a dapper man, light-complexioned, with a pencil mustache, and dressed in a careful and precise way that reminded me a little of my father. (I remember he kept his hat on as he played and sang, and that struck me as odd.) He was the very picture of the urban bluesman, and that was the image he projected as he sang – knowing, world-wise, a man who had no illusions but who still had pride in himself...

My father's attitude about all this was interesting. I remember asking him on the way home what he thought of Lonnie Johnson. he said he was a good guitar player, one of the best he had heard – and that's all he would say. I tried to draw him out on the blues we had heard, the odd, hushed style in which they'd been sung: I asked him what he thought of the blues and how come he didn't play them more himself. He just smiled, and shrugged, and changed the subject.

It was some time before Cook divined his father's attitude: that he, like many second-generation jazzmen, was more than a little ashamed of the vulgar origins of the music he played and loved, and had to distance himself emotionally from it.

Cook's memoir is a fine introduction to Lonnie Johnson. Like Bessie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Tampa Red and others, Johnson was one of the first generation of bluesmen to conceive a music rooted in, but distinct from, older country styles. Forfeiting the ponderous rhythm and jagged emotionalism of the older styles, this earliest urban blues was built around smooth, easy delivery. Bessie Smith, for instance, used only "high class musicians" (jazz instrumentalists) for her shows and identified little with all the boogie-woogie pianists and jugband music prevalent in the late twenties. "I sing city blues," Johnson told Valerie Wilmer in a 1963 interview for *Jazz Monthly*, and he regarded himself with considerable pride as an accomplished, all-round musician able to perform ballads, blues or jazz with equal facility. Yet he recorded extensively in formats much closer to the Delta than that of most other city bluesmen, and though far too talented to be *merely* a blues guitarist, as Joel Vance notes in *Stereo Review*, Johnson "never quite made the commitment to a broader view of jazz, electing to think mainly in blues terms."

The truth is, Lonnie Johnson sat comfortably on many fences – comfortably for him, if not the critics, historians and fans who like things neatly labeled. He had one of the longest recording careers in blues history, from 1925 through the mid-1960's, during which he produced a barrage of basic blues, hokum, haunting vocals, jazz guitar instrumentals and rhythm and blues – by his own count 572 songs. He accompanied blues shouter Texas Alexander, contributed solo parts to recordings by Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, cut the first jazz guitar duets with Eddie Lang. "His whole musical style and manner," Giles Oakley writes in *The Devil's Music*, "spoke of

urbane sophistication, from the clarity of his bittersweet voice to the clean-cut precision of his highly original guitar-playing. Yet when he accompanied the hollering Texas Alexander, while never abandoning his technical proficiency, he showed a sensitive empathy for the rough, emotional directness of country blues."

Lonnie Johnson is the major transitional figure in American guitar. Everything that came before – the complex patterns of Papa Charlie Jackson on six-string banjo, the rag-time blues of Blind Blake, the idiosyncratic runs and melodic flexibility of Blind Lemon Jefferson – comes together in his playing; and much that follows, issues from it, right up to the jazz lines of Kenny Burrell or B. B. King's whiplike call-and-response guitar accompaniment. Another important point is that Lonnie Johnson was from the first not an entertainer like Charley Patton, not a barroom singer or street musician like Blind Lemon and so many other bluesmen, but a professional musician. As Sam Charters points out in *Sweet As the Showers of Rain*, there was a proliferation of such artists in the thirties: "The blues, in their terms, was becoming another aspect of the professional music world, and it was that that drew them to the music." Lonnie was a serious musician before he was a popular bluesman, playing violin with dance orchestras and doubling as well on piano, harmonium, tenor banjo and guitar. In the blues he recorded, his refined guitar and vocals transcended regional styles and, in many cases, the blues idiom itself. He remains to this day one of the originals, uniquely both a first-generation bluesman and jazzman – an innovator and model musician whose authorship of modern blues guitar alone would guarantee his position in the history of American music.

A template for Lonnie Johnson's career:

1923	Advent of field recordings, breaking deadlock of northern studios and opening up market to folk and traditional music. First recordings of Bessie Smith.
1924	Papa Charlie Jackson, earliest male blues recording star, begins putting to wax first documented versions of standards like "Spoonful," "Salty Dog," "Shake That Thing."
1925	Lonnie wins blues contest at Booker T. Washington Theater, St. Louis; is recorded by Ralph Peer for Okeh Records; marries Mary Williams.
1926	First Blind Lemon Jefferson records. Big Bill Broonzy hired by Paramount as accompanist for various blues singers.
1927	Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers recorded by Ralph Peer; Lonnie records with Louis Armstrong; first Blind Willie McTell records; duets with Eddie Lang.
1928	Tampa Red's first recording, "It's Tight Like That," a huge hit (covered the following year by Lonnie and Spencer Williams as "It Feels So Good"). Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell's superbly uptown and influential "How Long, How Long Blues" comes out.
1930	Mississippi Sheiks's first sessions bring together the string band and blues tradition on record.
1936–37	Robert Johnson sessions in Dallas and San Antonio.
1947	Lonnie debuts with electric guitar on record; begins association with King Records.
1948	Fats Domino's first record, "The Fat Man."
1953	First Jimmie Reed record.
1954	Lonnie works as janitor in Philadelphia hotel.
1960	Begins recording again, plays coffeehouses, folk clubs.
1970	Last public appearance.

Lonnie Johnson was born February 8, 1894, at Rampart and Franklin in New Orleans. The years 1899 and 1900 have also been given, but 1894 seems the likeliest and was the one given on his passport. Big Bill Broonzy remembered that "Lonnie told me he was born in New Orleans in 1894, but he looked to be, in 1952, about forty-seven years old." The entire family appears to have been musically gifted, and after a brief stint in a lumberyard,

Lonnie began working with them, more or less professionally. "We all played music – five sisters and six brothers, mother and father," Lonnie recalled years later in conversation with Paul Oliver. "We played for banquets and weddings and things like that all around."

Bassist George "Pops" Foster remembered Lonnie in his autobiography. "Lonnie Johnson and his daddy and brother used to go all over New Orleans playing on street corners. Lonnie played guitar and his daddy and brother played violin." One assumes that, like other string bands of the period, they mixed popular tunes, old-time fiddle music, and blues.

During World War I an influenza epidemic killed all of the family save one older brother. Working with a theatrical company touring overseas to entertain troops at the time, Lonnie returned to find himself alone in New Orleans. "So I started playing music for a living," he told Oliver. "And the blues was all the go then and from then on I loved blues and just continued playing them." He worked at the Iroquois Theater for a time, then at Frank Pineri's on Iberville and Burgundy. "Strictly blues all the way – on the violin. And I made several numbers on the piano – I used to play piano for a while, but only blues, no popular songs. Then I bought my guitar. I bought it in 1917. It's a beautiful instrument."

Soon, though, Lonnie took to the road, inevitably heading north. "I got to ramblin' – usually people get that way. I couldn't keep my feet still so I just started traveling." He stopped over in Texas, then made his way to St. Louis, playing on the excursion boats there and eventually joining Charlie Creath's band on the steamer *St. Paul*. He was with Creath seven years, recording with him as vocalist and violinist for Creath's 1925 Okeh session. "I played violin then, but I never went back to violin any more after that. My brother, he played piano, *and* violin, *and* guitar. He was better than me."

Lonnie and his big brother James played together frequently in St. Louis. Big Bill Broonzy said, "I remember I came to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1921 and I met Lonnie Johnson and his brother. They called him Buddy Johnson. Then Buddy was playing the piano and Lonnie was playing the violin, guitar, bass, mandolin, banjo and all the things that you could make music on, and he was good on either one he picked up and he could sing too, just as good." There's some evidence Lonnie left Creath for a time about 1922 following a disagreement, and this may have been the period in which he worked extensively with this brother. A piano player named DeLoise Searcy eventually joined them. James played violin, Lonnie the guitar, though occasionally they'd "switch it around" just for fun.

The same year Lonnie recorded with Creath's band, 1925, a blues contest was sponsored by talent scouts from Okeh Records at the Booker T. Washington Theater in St. Louis. Lonnie entered and won, receiving a recording contract with Okeh. His first record was cut a few days after the Creath session, his appeal to black audiences proving so strong that for a couple of years Okeh issued a new Lonnie Johnson record every six weeks.

"I win first prize for eighteen weeks," Lonnie told Paul Oliver in 1962. "I win every week for eighteen weeks and I got an eleven-year contract with Okeh and that started me in the business. Made some fine recordings for Okeh. ... And that's the way it started, and from then on I've been singing blues and I've wrote a whole lot of numbers in my life. ... I recorded so many numbers ... it takes a lifetime to figure them all, but yes, I know how many. Five hundred seventy-two. I know, I got copies."

During the first year or so of recording, Lonnie played violin, piano, harmonium and guitar; from about 1927 on he abandoned all other instruments in favor of the guitar. He also worked as accompanist on records by Spencer Williams, Clara Smith, Victoria Spivey and Texas Alexander. He'd met Alexander in Dallas after departing New Orleans, and when Lonnie went north, Alexander followed and began his own recording career, a modest but successful one. Big Bill Broonzy years later wrote that "Texas Alexander plays something like Lonnie Johnson" – apparently not realizing that Alexander in fact played no instrument at all, and the guitarist on his records *was* Lonnie Johnson.

Also in 1925 Lonnie married a woman from Yazoo City, Mississippi, named Mary Williams.

A word about the black fiddle tradition.

The instrument was as popular with blacks as with whites at the turn of the century, and blacks used to play not only the breakdowns and dance music required of them by whites, but also their own. The fiddle's expressiveness and flexibility, along with its wide range of tone color, make it a natural for blues; it is, after all, the instrument closest to the human voice, capable of tones and effects achievable by no other.

In 1920 Leroy Parker became the first blues fiddler to record, accompanying Mamie Smith on her second session. Bessie Smith recorded with fiddler Robert Robbins in 1924, and Clara Smith with Leon Abbey in 1925, the year of Lonnie Johnson's first records. Jelly Roll Morton recorded with a pair of fiddlers the following year. Henry Sims accompanied Charley Patton on several records; Peg Leg Howell recorded frequently with Eddie Anthony on fiddle. In 1930 the Mississippi Sheiks featured Lonnie Chatmon's lead fiddle on all their records.

"The black fiddling tradition lingers," Nick Tosches wrote in *Country: The Biggest Music in America*. "In 1972 fiddler Claude Williams, who was born in 1908 in Oklahoma, cut a beautiful and not at all archaic album with pianist Jay McShann for Sackville Records. ... Williams was the fiddler with Andy Kirk and His Twelve Clouds of Joy in the 1920's and 1930's."

Fiddlers who continued the black tradition into jazz were Eddie South, a conservatory violinist equally at home with classical pieces, gypsy music or jazz, who recorded with Django Reinhardt in 1937 and himself led a number of combos, and Stuff Smith, who played raucous "barrelhouse jazz" on an amplified instrument. Fiddlers such as Papa John Creach, Don "Sugar Cane" Harris and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown today carry on this tradition. Bill Simon, reviewing the evolution of modern guitar in his piece on Charlie Christian for *The Jazz Makers*, wrote:

Johnson came first. He began to record around 1925, mainly backing blues singers, and musicians began to notice that, more than just the voice with accompaniment, he was beginning to make each side a partnership. Single-string obligato figures, interesting chord changes and voicings, and occasional solo passages by Johnson took the guitar a giant step from the primitive rolling rhythm backings of the cotton-field pluckers, and introduced the first virtuoso elements.

Lonnie soon became, in fact, the model for most contemporary bluesmen.

"I began to listen to Lonnie Johnson's records in the late 1920's," Brownie McGhee recalls. "I had never thought that kind of music could be made with voice and guitar, and I just kept listening. ... His musical works may and should be the first book of the blues bible."

By 1930 Lonnie's influence was sweeping, and it continued to deepen. Memphis Minnie's single-string lead guitar often sounded remarkably like his; some of Blind Blake's instrumental choruses were similar in conception to Johnson's own; and Blind Willie McTell put out several numbers such as "Death Cell Blues" and "Bell Street Blues" which both in vocal inflection and accompaniment style could almost have *been* Lonnie's.

Another big fan was Robert Johnson. "He often talked about Lonnie Johnson," fellow bluesman Johnny Shines remembers. "He admired his music so much that he would tell people that ... he was related to Lonnie Johnson." Like McTell, Robert Johnson put out several sides, among them "Malted Milk" and "Drunken Hearted Man," that sound eerily like Lonnie himself. Even after the Depression drove him from music for a time in the mid-thirties, Lonnie's influence continued not only in the cities but also (and perhaps particularly) in the South, where the next generation of bluesmen avidly studied his distinctive guitar style, restrained vocals and the subtle interplay of the two.

That guitar style clearly paved the way for the first electric guitarists, Eddie Durham and Charlie Christian, and closely prefigured the postwar evolution of blues guitar. Lowell Fulson credits Johnson as a prominent influence in the development of his own style; T-Bone Walker stated that Lonnie and Scrapper Blackwell were far and away his favorite guitarists. And B. B. King says, "There's only been a few guys that if I could play just like them I would. T-Bone Walker was one, Lonnie Johnson was another." In this respect, the title given an Australian album, *Lonnie Johnson: The Originator of Modern Guitar Blues* (Blues Boy 300), is not at all hyperbolic.

Lonnie's marriage lasted seven years and is sketched by Giles Oakley in *The Devil's Music*, chiefly through references to songs recorded by Lonnie and Mary – for she became a popular blues singer in her own right. We do know that she and Lonnie separated with considerable bitterness on both sides in 1932, and that Mary moved back in with her mother, eventually turning away from blues and singing only for the church.

It is never easy, of course, when man and wife follow the same profession, especially in the arts; and the life of a working musician, with late nights and irregular hours, drink, all-too-accessible partners and a basic insecurity, has domestic difficulty built firmly into it. Then, too, one assumes financial problems (for Lonnie was having increasing difficulty finding steady work as a soloist because of the Depression) played a part.

Mary had begun by helping Lonnie with some of his songs, then began writing her own. "I got some of my ideas from my husband, Lonnie Johnson," she told Paul Oliver in 1962; impoverished, she was living with her mother in a small apartment above a fish wholesaler in St. Louis. "He didn't give me the ideas exactly; I think you know you just have a talent for some things. I used to help him a bit. We were sittin' there and I give him few ideas on the 'Tornado Blues,' that's when the tornado hit St. Louis. And he says, 'Sweetheart, why don't you compose your own numbers and we'll play 'em for you and you make good yourself.' And so we did." Mary worked the St. Louis clubs, often with pianists Roosevelt Sykes or Henry Brown, and had a large following.

The year she and Lonnie separated, Mary recorded both "Rattlesnake Blues" ("Ah, that's right, daddy, that's all right for you / Some day you'll want for Mary and she'll be so far from you") and "Mary Johnson Blues" ("I once was a married woman, sorry the day I ever was / I was a young girl at home and I did not know the world").

Lonnie himself would not record from about 1932 to 1937, but a 1939 session yielded these titles among others: "Why Women Go Wrong," "She's Only a Woman," "Trust Your Husband" and "She's My Mary." It would be impudent, naturally, to insist on parallels between private life and commercial recording. But it is inconceivable that Johnson, an artist deeply involved with the mutability of human emotions and relationships, who stressed that his blues came from "the heartaches and the things that have happened to me in my life," did not use the raw material of his own life for transmutation to art.

In May 1927, Lonnie and Mary moved for several months to New York City. Lonnie recorded with Victoria Spivey and Texas Alexander in this period, then in November cut his first guitar duets with Eddie Lang. These proved so successful that two more dates were set for May and October the following year. Also in 1927, on December 10 and 13, Lonnie joined Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five for their last recording sessions, helping produce four titles that are, according to critic Richard Hadlock, "good examples of Louis near the apex of his musical career." The titles were "Savoy Blues," "Hotter Than That," "I'm Not Rough" and "Mahogany Hall Blues Stomp." Sam Charters describes these cuts in *The Country Blues*:

He and Louis seemed to inspire each other, and two of the blues they recorded, "I'm Not Rough," on Okeh 8551, and "Savoy Blues," on Okeh 8535, are among the Hot Five's classic performances. For "I'm Not Rough," Lonnie played an insistent doubled rhythm, playing almost a drumming chord, and continued the idea in his solo while Johnny St. Cyr, the group's banjo player, played the chords softly behind him. During Louis's vocal, Lonnie, with St. Cyr very much in the background, was the only accompaniment, and he played a rhythmic variation that emphasized the rough, shouted quality of Louis's hoarse singing. The group finally seemed to give way to Lonnie's rhythmic intensity, and as the recording ended, they broke into a fierce double rhythm. As if to demonstrate his versatility, for the recording of "Savoy Blues" Lonnie didn't play until after a beautifully lyric solo by Armstrong and a gentle ensemble strain by the group. With St. Cyr playing a second guitar behind him, Lonnie answered Armstrong's lyricism with an almost song-like solo. His reputation as a jazz guitarist was secure.

In early 1928 Lonnie was on the road. He recorded in San Antonio and played the Ella B. Moore Theater in Dallas, coming second to local favorite Lillian Glinn in a blues contest there. He was on the TOBA and RKO circuits, playing in "everything that was playable. Every theater there was and every place they could make into a theater or call a theater," from New York and Philadelphia down to Texas and New Orleans. He made the repeat dates with Eddie Lang that year and joined the Duke Ellington band in January and again in October to record "The Mooche," "Hot and Bothered," "Misty Mornin'" and "Blues with a Feelin'."

Lonnie also toured southern theaters with Bessie Smith about this time. "Nobody I knew could sing better than Bessie," Lonnie said. "She didn't mind shouting over a crowd to wake them up and make them listen to her sing. She didn't need a microphone, either. Bessie was lively and full of fun, but nobody pushed her around." She once stood up to a group of Klansmen who started pulling down the tent she was performing in, leveling so much abuse at them while threatening to bring the whole audience out there that they turned and left.

Lonnie and Bessie got pretty friendly, and Bessie's niece Ruby Wlaker recalls, "It was a constant thing to see Lonnie coming in and out of Bessie's stateroom, and he kept her company on the whole tour. I thought it was strange seeing her messin' around with someone her own age, but they really carried on together." In a 1959 interview Lonnie said, "She was sweet on me, but we never got real serious – Bessie had too many things going for her."

Lonnie's duets with Eddie Lang are certainly among the best produced in their decade and the most influential guitar music ever. Various sources report that for these sessions Lonnie used a twelve-string guitar, a guitar with additional treble string or one with single bass (E-A-D) and doubled treble (G-B-E) strings. We do know that Lonnie once favored the twelve-string: "He played the first twelve-string guitar I ever heard," George Barnes said. And Lawrence Cohn writes, "Most of Johnson's jazz solos were taken on the twelve-string guitar," but he believes Lonnie had discarded the instrument by the mid-thirties. It is impossible to tell from the records what Lonnie is actually playing, and no other documentation exists.

The liner notes to Yazoo Records's *Pioneers of the Jazz Guitar* beautifully describe one of the duets:

"Handful of Riffs" follows their usual presentation, with Johnson ... playing lead and Lang supplying bass. Although it takes a conventional twelve-bar blues progression in D, its spontaneity and supple rhythms (qualities virtually absent in the early jazz guitar-playing) give it a true jazz character. Spinning an improvisatory melody line, Johnson toys with the beat in a different fashion on each verse, changing the tempo after the seventh verse and launching a perfect series of pulled-off triplets. His creativity is further evident in his distinctive guitar tone, touch and texture, all of which made Johnson Lang's most formidable twenties' rival.

The primary difference in the two guitarists seems finally one of tone: Lang's archtop has a cumbrous, rather dense tone, while Lonnie's flattop is somewhat brighter and more labile. The duets remain today fresh and exciting. When recorded, they were revolutionary.

Two contemporaries.

Teddy Bunn had much in common with Lonnie. Both were singers with sophisticated urban blues guitar styles, and both early on in their careers worked extensively as accompanists for other bluesmen. However, where Lonnie elected to work primarily in the blues idiom after his early contacts with jazz, Bunn's later career was exclusively jazz oriented.

Bunn started off playing banjo-guitar. He recorded with Spencer Williams and with the Washboard Serenaders, playing fluent single-string solos, then in 1929, with Duke Ellington, also touring with him briefly as a substitute for the ill Freddy Guy. Bunn worked regularly as part of the Spirits of Rhythm for many years, recorded with Sidney Bechet, Johnny Dodds and others, and was among the first to champion the amplified instrument, playing electric guitar at least as early as 1938 in an organ/drums/guitar trio. Another interesting point is that Bunn played with his thumb, something for which Wes Montgomery became famous many years later.

"When seen in perspective," Norman Mongan noted in an article for *The Oak Report*, "it becomes clear that Bunn continued Lonnie Johnson's pioneering efforts. He took the guitar out of the blues context and into the harmonically more advanced musical horizons of the swing era."

Another neglected and now-obscure guitarist of the period is Snoozer Quinn. Based in New Orleans, he was a favorite of Bix Beiderbecke and Frank Trumbauer and worked for a year with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra but eventually returned to New Orleans, working club jobs and at one point backing up hillbilly singer (later governor) Jimmie Davis. There are few existing records – none in print at this time – and Quinn even in his own time was unknown to the general public. He seems to have been something of a missing link between country blues guitarists and early soloists like Lonnie and Lang. He retained the steady bass roll (alternated thumb) of "ragtime" blues, adding partial chords on middle strings and melody line on top, rather the way later guitarists like George Van Eps and Lenny Breau have come to play. Quinn was, writes Mongan, "an artist whose style represents an important evolutionary step in jazz guitar history. Unfortunately for the twenties' public, Snoozer's intimate, swinging guitar sounds were lost in the clamor of the Whiteman organization."

"Contrary to the common belief, jazz guitarists didn't lack talent in the early days; they just lacked volume."

By 1929 Lonnie had serious difficulty supporting himself as a soloist. The record companies themselves were feeling the crunch of the Depression; Okeh, a subsidiary of Columbia since 1926, was drifting into bankruptcy. Lonnie cut his last record for the label in September 1932.

Sometime in 1929 Lonnie teamed up with Putney Dandridge. "I was with Putney Dandridge for a long time," he told Paul Oliver, "and we had thirty-three dollars between us and we were makin' for Chicago but we couldn't make it so that's what run us into Cleveland, Ohio, round on the lake there." They played at a club called the Heatwave in the Majestic Hotel and began doing fifteen-minute radio shows each week on WATM. They were there only four months before Dandridge ran off in pursuit of a woman he'd corresponded with. "So I was back on my own again. ... I tried to make it in Chicago but I had to quit the music business."

For several years Lonnie worked outside music, first for a railroad tie manufacturer in Galesburg, Illinois, then at a steel foundry in Peoria. He played his blues at night and may have worked sporadically on other radio stations such as WJAY and WHM.

By 1937 or so things were improving generally, and Lonnie's career took a dramatic upswing. He received an offer from the Club Three Deuces on North State Street in Chicago and worked there until the club burned down

in 1940. He was playing with New Orleans drummer Baby Dodds, a veteran of the King Oliver Band and a cornerstone of modern jazz percussion.

"I would have to play along and try to do as much as I could to fill in the different parts," Dodds said. "Then, too, I had to play very softly and smoothing, so as to let the guitar's sound protrude over the drum. I had to think all the time what to put in, and what not to put in. But it was a great experience and helped make me both versatile and light-handed."

About the same time Lonnie recorded an excellent guitar solo on Jimmie Noone's *Keystone Blues*. Noone was the first of the great jazz clarinet players, a profound influence not only on other clarinetists such as Joe Marsala, Franck Teschemacher and Benny Goodman, but on young guitarist George Barnes and the entire evolving "Chicago sound" as well.

After the Three Deuces, Lonnie went into the Boulevard Lounge on East Fifty-first Street, probably with another guitarist and a bass. He eventually moved on to Square's on West Fifty-first Street and remained there several years. By 1948 he was working with Roosevelt Sykes at the Flame Club on South Indiana. Pioneer blues harpist Sonny Boy Williamson was playing just around the corner. Lonnie described that time in his career.

So we would alternate on our intermission time and go 'round to the Plantation Club and keep him company and play with him, and on his intermission time he'd come 'round to the club where I was workin' at, place called the Flame. So he just come 'round, and then went back, went 'round the corner. He said, "Well, I'll see you after a while, when you get off. Come on 'round to the club." I say, "OK." And about five minutes later a feller came round and says he's dead. And we thought he was kiddin' you know? He had seventeen holes in his head with an ice pick. They ganged him. He was 'bout one of the finest fellers I know. They never did find out who killed him.

Lonnie eventually moved to Ruby Gatewood's Tavern on West Lake and North Artesian Avenue, called the gate by bluesmen such as Kokomo Arnold, Big Bill and Memphis Minnie who played there. "Ruby Gatewood was a hard person to work for," Lonnie told Paul Oliver. "That's right. You work all right – but try and get your money! Memphis Slim was the only one could get it. Go to the cash register and just take it. He was the only one would do that. The union got behind her – and *still* didn't make no difference. She still wouldn't pay, that's all." Lonnie wound up working for a Mr. Gaston on West Lake: "I worked a year for him at a hundred five dollars a week! And he paid every week, he was a great guy. He's still in business. He don't have music but he still has the same crowd he had on Lake – they follered him out there to Sevent-ninth and Wentworth. Great Crowd."

Lonnie Jonson also resumed his recording career in 1937, with Decca Records, and one of his releases must have expressed what most blacks and other impoverished people were feeling:

People ravin' 'bout hard times
I don't know why they should.
If some people was like me they didn't
have no money when times was good.

In 1939 Lonnie moved to Bluebird Records for five years and his new recordings, often featuring fine piano accompaniment by Joshua Altheimer, Lil Armstrong or Blind John Davis, were soone even more popular than the older ones. Several of these cuts are available on *Lonnie Johnson: The Originator of Modern Guitar Blues* (Blues Boy 300). Some of the earlier, 1937-38 recordings (with Roosevelt Sykes on piano and Ransom Knowling on bass) are on *The Blues of Lonnie Johnson* (Swaggie Records 1225). *Mr. Johnson's Blues* (Mamlish 3807) contains work from 1926 to 1932, five of the fourteen cuts as accompanist to other vocalists. Both *Lonnie Johnson* (Collector's Classics 30) and *Lonnie Johnson* (Origin Jazz Library 23) are devoted to the early recordings. *Eddie Lang and Lonnie Johnson* (Swaggie Records 1229), subtitled *Volume One*, contains four solo cuts from each of the guitarists, six of thier duets and one cut apiece with Louis Armstrong.

Soon Lonnie was back on the road promoting his new records and was in considerable demand oncae again. He played Detroit and down through the Midwest, across to St. Louis and Kansas City, and swung out to the West Coast. From the beginning of his career to 1945, about two hundred titles came out in Lonnie's name; postwar,

at least one hundred seventy-five others were issued. As earlier mentioned, Lonnie himself set the total number, including his work as accompanist to others, at five hundred seventy-two.

In 1946 Lonnie cut six sides for Disc Records and in June the following year debuted on electric guitar with Aladdin Records. Ironically, the player who set the course for modern blues guitar was never as convincing with the electric as with an acoustic, nonamplified instrument; just as with Django Reinhardt, some vital sensitivity or response was lost in translation. Primarily, I think, this is a matter of tone.

By late 1947 Lonnie had affiliated with King Records, an emerging independent label from Cincinnati. Henry Glover, vice-president for Starday/King, reported,

When I came with King Records, as a recording director in the late 1940's, Lonnie Johnson was a blues singer-guitarist. I had known him for many years because he had been in Detroit, singing in different clubs ... Lonnie was what you would call a table troubadour and he would go from table to table singing and playing ... Lonnie had moved to Cincinnati and he lived over in Rockdale where he had purchased a house.

During his five-year tenure with King, Lonnie had four big hits in the rhythm and blues market: "Tomorrow Night," "Pleasing You," "So Tired" and "Confused." Rhythm and blues was then the catchall term for black music, in much the same way as companies in the thirties and forties had spoken of "race" records, and Lonnie's own sides were ballads as often as not, smooth crooners with lush backgrounds in which his guitar was lost or wholly absent. A two-volume reissue of the King recordings entitled *Tomorrow Night* periodically resurfaces in cutout bins or in clearance lists.

"With the mass impersonality of the city and its problems of acute economic distress and social instability," Giles Oakley writes, "the language of communication needed a wider currency than the metaphorical allusiveness of the country blues could provide." By 1952 when Lonnie toured England, his popularity at home was subsiding rapidly. Commercial music hurtled toward the heavy beat of Chicago-style blues and rock and roll. Artistry and subtlety of Lonnie's sort were superfluous. His association with King Records ended that year as well, and a handful of scattered sides on various labels throughout the rest of the decade sold poorly or not at all.

Resulting from the reissue of his older records and a growing reputation there, Lonnie's eleven-month tour of England met with a mixed reception. Many fans were disappointed, expecting the earlier singer and guitarist they knew from the records and not responding too enthusiastically to the new, slicker music. A subsequent, more relaxed series of concerts, however, helped reestablish his standing.

Returning from England, Lonnie settled in Philadelphia and began working as a janitor at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel. He was located there by jazz writer Chris Albertson in 1960, during the peak years of the folk-music revival, and urged back into the studio. Lonnie cut seven LPs, five of them for Prestige/Bluesville, as well as miscellaneous anthology tracks. His new audience must have been something of a surprise to him: young, predominantly white, middle class. But he played the coffeehouse and folk-club circuits, just as he'd much earlier played vaudeville's, and in 1963 toured Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival. He was the oldest member, Paul Oliver wrote, but "still able to demonstrate his remarkable command of the guitar."

As the rediscovery craze of the sixties continued, however, Lonnie's name began appearing less frequently in blues publications and on concert posters. "It became apparent," Per Notini suggests in the notes to *Lonnie Johnson: The Originator of Modern Guitar Blues*, "that the white middle class were not appreciating black artistry (as represented by Lonnie) as much as black primitiveness (as executed by Mance Lipscomb, Robert Pete Williams, Fred McDowell, etc.)." Once again, Lonnie Johnson was caught in the middle ground. His pop ballads, sentimentality and polish (professionalism) offended the seekers of "pure" blues. Paul Garon, in an obituary for *Living Blues*, complained bitterly of Lonnie's relative obscurity and the inclination of blues researchers to involve themselves exclusively with prewar rural singers and postwar urban ones. Lonnie did not fit any convenient category; he never had.

He did find some admirers in Canada, and spent most of his last five years there. For the notes to *The Blues of Lonnie Johnson* in 1969, Bill Haesler observed, "At the moment Lonnie Johnson is enjoying his 'rediscovery' in Toronto, but to a man who forty years ago was the number one 'race' artist for the Okeh record company the present popularity must seem insignificant indeed." Not long after this was written, Lonnie was hit by a runaway car on a Toronto sidewalk and hospitalized for several months. Just as he began to recuperate he suffered a stroke to his left side.

Lonnie Johnson made his final public appearance at a Toronto blues show in February 1970, accompanied by guitarist Buddy Guy. Four months later, June 6, he was dead.

"He was a serious man, much concerned with the complexity of human relationships and the stresses put upon them, and over the years of his recording career he continually returned to the subject, worrying away at it, sometimes with a melting sentimentality, sometimes with anger and bitterness and sometimes facing the anguish of failure with attempts to understand," wrote Giles Oakley about Lonnie's pervasive theme and its several manifestations.

Recognition of this complexity is an essential key to Lonnie Johnson. His work was never one-dimensional in the manner of Son House or Bukka White, nor obsessive like Robert Johnson's; he came at his subjects from many directions, seemingly aware that there could be no simple truth, no unmixed emotion. From published interviews, his speech seems also to have reflected this, his mind moving back and forth easily in time, making uncommon connections, trying to grab in a single handful as much of the shifting world as he could. And one suspects his own awareness of such complexity prompted the subtlety of his guitar playing and sinuous, reserved vocals.

Lonnie Johnson probably should be as well known as Bessie Smith or Louis Armstrong: his artistry is at that level. But when I began planning this book, I could find in none of the books in my jazz library more than brief comments about Lonnie, and books on blues offered little more. What I did find was often contradictory and misleading. Of the albums I owned then, one had been rescued from a cutout bin for \$1.99 and the others were imports from Sweden, Denmark, Australia, England.

It is as a guitarist that Lonnie Johnson is best remembered now, though this may well change as the instrument passes from current idolatry and general musical directions change. Certainly his graceful lines, delicate embellishments, use of combined duple and triple meters over ninth and diminished chords are major cornerstones in modern guitar. His touch, the expressiveness he achieved on the instrument, was a revelation in his time and still affords a rich and rare harvest to guitarists. And his were the first solos to be actually *built* – constructed around subtle changes, gathering momentum directly from the music itself, climaxing in a way that also followed from the music and made perfect sense.

Duck Baker described for *Frets* what happened when young guitar wizards got together one time in London to listen to Lonnie's records:

Lonnie Johnson was an absolutely terrifying guitar player. There's no explanation for the way he played! Stefan [Grossman] was recently trying to figure out how Lonnie Johnson was playing his solos, and Stefan had gotten the tape and was playing it at half speed. Tom Van Bergyk and I were in there trying to figure it out with him. What eventually happened was that Stefan made a nice instrumental, playing at half speed! Nobody could really figure out what Johnson was doing. All right, Reverend Gary Davis was a great guitar player, and Blind Blake was a great guitar player, but I can understand what those guys were doing. When it comes to Lonnie Johnson, he was so quick; and even the records where I know what he's doing, well to make his fingers move like that, he was a little along the lines of Django Reinhardt. Those duets Johnson did with Eddie Lang are some of the best things ever. Eddie Lang as a rhythm guitar player – I don't think anybody's ever topped that.

It seems likely that Lonnie, whose recording career in the twenties was profoundly successful, who came back and built another career in the late thirties and again in the forties and yet again in the sixties, has still another, posthumous career ahead – perhaps the greatest of all – as increasing numbers of guitarists and blues and jazz enthusiasts rediscover his inimitable music.

[End]

This study of Lonnie Johnson is the first chapter in *The Guitar Players* (1982; rev. ed. 1994).

An accomplished musician himself, James Sallis has written widely on music. In addition to editing two musicological essay collections, *Jazz Guitars* (1984) and *The Guitar in Jazz* (1996), he has written variously for *Guitar and Mandolin*, *Frets*, and *CD Review*.

