

"I'll eat my breakfast right here in this city, New Orleans. I'm the highway walkin'est has ever seen." Brownie McGhee has from Blind Boy Fuller and Leadbelly to now. His playing and singing are rooted in the past as the present and this fact accounts for the strength of his statement. The autobiography and music presented here are from the Guitar Styles of Brownie McGhee by Brownie and Happy Traum.

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**MUDDY WATERS**

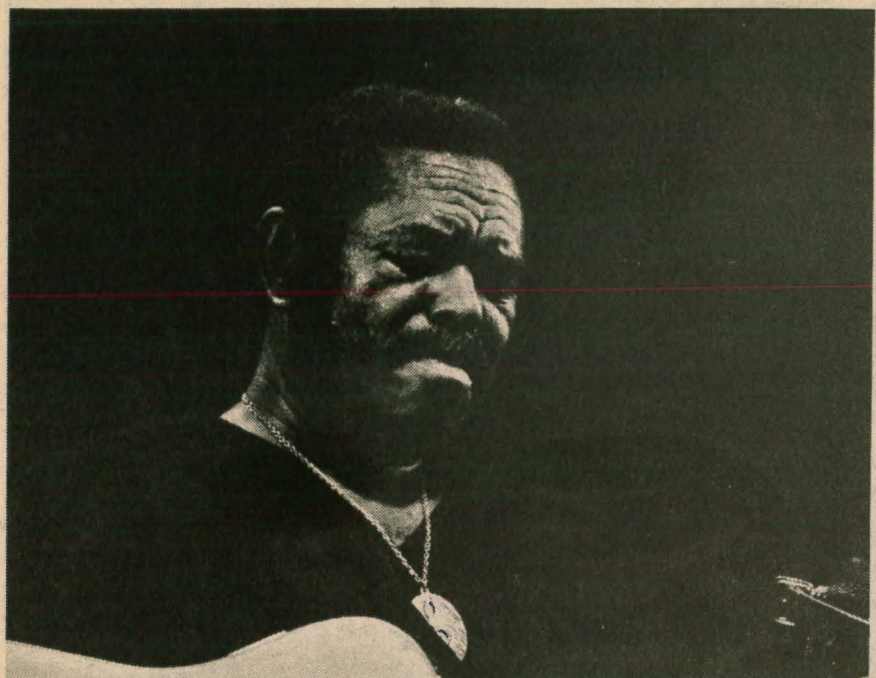
**BROWNIE MCGHEE**

**JESSE FULLER**

I was born in a little place in Tennessee called Knoxville, which used to be the capital, once upon a time years ago. Then it was moved to Nashville. I was born on the corner of Spring and Poplar in a place that was called the Old Ark, an old church. It was standing until a few years ago, and then they destroyed it. This place overlooked the Southern Railroad. Then my father migrated from there to Kingsport. He helped to build a city there. During the time I was born, he said the blues was born with me. I was the first boy that was born after three attempts (two sisters older than me) and I was born on November the 30th at five o'clock in the morning, 1915. As far as I can understand I was pretty much

worshipped because I was the first son. I heard my father and mother say that my first brother, George Curtis, died, so automatically they were driving hard, and I was the next boy. 

# McGhee



David Gahr

We migrated to this little town where I got my education by hard struggle, and that's where my father and mother separated in 1922. My song, *Born With The Blues* is true. I'm from a broken home. I don't know if my mother and father had been together what would have been the outcome.

During the time I was coming up, you understand, they figured that a boy child didn't need an education, he was going to earn his living by manual labor. But my two sisters were given music. During this period of time I had a brother that was born, Granville H. McGhee—known after he got grown as Sticks McGhee in professional life—who has passed on now. We never had any musical training, but my father give my sisters a piano and imported a man for fifty miles to give them lessons. They never learned, so he gave me and my brother the piano, figured we'd tear it up and get it out of the house, but we learned to pick out notes on it. So the piano was my first love, although I was exposed to the guitar at the same time.

I really started by playing a Prince Albert tobacco can with rubber bands on it. I would strike those strings and beat it with the back of my hand while my father would play

his guitar. This was when I was a little kid, maybe six or seven years old. That's as far back as I can remember.

My father always figured I had some rhythm. He thought maybe I'd be a drummer. So, I fooled around with tobacco cans, things like that. He bought me one of these little-old stripey-backed toy ukeles—I remember that as if it was yesterday. It would never stay in tune, and I couldn't keep as much rhythm on it as I could on the 'bacco can, so I lost interest in it. Then he bought the piano, and I started picking up on that, and about the same time I was poking around with the guitar. I still play a little piano.

Later, we left this little town, Kingsport, and went further down south in Tennessee, out in the country, about eight miles from any store. There was nothing out there but guitars and banjos, a few french harps (harmonicas), jews harps, and so on, and I started strumming the guitar. I had some cousins there who played pretty good hillbilly music. We were in that part of the country where they played a lot of that "country music", as we called it.

This feller came out of North Carolina in one of my last years in high school. I never will forget him.

He was a big feller with very bad feet—called him T.T. Carter. He was a very good guitar blues player. I had a little shack then, so all the traveling musicians and guitar players, well, everybody would send them to me. I was very impressed with this guy, even though T.T. Carter was never known, and after he left I just fell in love with the guitar all of a sudden.

When I was a boy I was stricken with polio—what they called at that time infantile paralysis. What little money my father had saved, why he spent it all trying to rid me of that infantile paralysis, which was never successful. So, today I'm a man with a short leg, but I had crutches and a cane until I was 18 or 19 years old. Then I met up with a fabulous lady out of Texas, Mrs. Fulbright. She was the nurse at the Negro schools at the time, and she figured I could be helped and get rid of the crutches and cane, which she did. She met a German doctor at the time of Roosevelt's administration when the March of Dimes was started (he was a victim of polio too), and she said, "Brownie, I think I can help you. Would you like to walk without crutches or a cane?" I said, "Yes, I would love that." So, my case was taken, and this German doctor operated on me around '35 or '36, and today instead of having my foot five inches from the ground it's an inch and a quarter. No crutch and no cane, pretty good. But anyway I never quit, and that's when I really fell in love with the guitar, when I felt I could carry it with me. One word the doctor said to me, and it's followed me down. Last time I went to see him he said, "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. That was over thirty years ago.

I went on the road for six years, hitch hiking, playing and singing. I played on the highways, the byways, road houses, dens, churches, anyplace. I'd join a church just to get to play if they needed a guitar, I enjoyed it so much. Mostly I was just living, I wanted to see the world I never had seen. I made the attempt,

To Ruth  
"The greatest  
guitarist in all the world!"  
Brownie  
McGhee



BROWNIE MCGHEE

but my crutches and cane always kept me deprived of a lot of things. I never liked to stay still, so when he said seek my fortune I just left home, started walking and playing. Anybody wanted to hear music, I'd stay and play for them. I made a living six years that way. I depended on my guitar more so than anything else.

I was on a hitch-hiking trip in '37 or '38, scouting about from Tennessee to North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia, when I ran into a harmonica player name of Jordan Webb in Winston-Salem. He told me I sounded like Blind Boy Fuller. He was a good harmonica player—a Tennessee boy, too, out of Memphis. At the time I met him he was 45, much older than I was. He said, "I'd like to start playing my harmonica again. Do you want to travel?" I said, "I'm a travellin' man!" So, he quit his job with R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, and we started out from Winston-Salem, wandered down to Greensboro, and got into Burlington.

Then I met Blind Boy Fuller and Sonny Terry, and we became friendly. Blind Boy told me, "Man, you can sing, but you can't play the guitar." It wasn't very encouraging to a young upstart like me when I found out he had records and everybody was trying to play like him. I never had the impression that I played like him or sounded like him. Everybody thought so, but I had never heard any of his records 'til I met him. Where I was from, Blind Lemon and Lonnie Johnson and Tampa Red was the big sellers. Blind Boy Fuller hadn't caught on, and his records just didn't get into Tennessee that easy.

Years before, before I had left Tennessee, I had a washboard band—four guitars and two washboards. The washboard players are still living: Leroy Dallas and Washboard George. Washboard George was a good melody man, played on his cymbals and things like that, and Leroy Dallas was a good rhythm player and a good blues singer, now living in Brooklyn. Having trouble with his eyes now, but he still plays a little. Left the washboard and went to guitar. I had the opportunity of recording with him when I was in

New York with a record company of mine and he made about six or seven sides. I had a fellow playing called Leslie Riddle. We used to play together; he played mandolin guitar, and piano, and I played piano and guitar. The first theater I ever worked was the Gym Theater in Kingsport, Tenn. Him and me did that song, *What's The Reason That I'm Not Pleasin' You*, (and we won the ten bucks) and *Roll Out The Barrel, We'll Have a Barrel of Fun*. He wouldn't leave home with me. We started out together, but he turned around and come back. So that got me on the adventure of continuing on.

I was doing the street playing and everything after records went down (they were using shellac for the army), so I went down to Columbia to get a release. Columbia said, "You're not under contract to us, you're under contract to J.B. Long. We buy our artists from him. We don't have anything to do with you." Mayo Williams at Decca was interested in recording me, but he wouldn't do it until I got a release. When he found out I was hooked to Long, that killed the Decca session. He said, "I had trouble with Blind Boy Fuller, and I don't want more trouble with this guy." So then I found out how much I was making per session. I was making almost seven hundred, and getting only a hundred and twenty five out of it. So I wrote to J.B. Long and he set me free. Then I couldn't get a job with Victor, Decca, so on, so I started playing out on the street with Sonny. I was picked up by a West Indian fellow to be my manager, and he introduced me to Savoy Records. From Savoy I was introduced to quite a few record shops around. Then I started a label of my own, me and another fellow. Later I was bought out by some racketeers. This was in 1942, '43. So, I was playing the streets again. I'd get down to 59th Street, down around to the "Crossroads of the World", when they didn't run me off. I had to keep walking to play, so I thought it was better to play in my own neighborhood.

Then Savoy Records started selling. I still wasn't under contract; I

just had a gentleman's agreement. Then Petrillo banned recordings in '48, and during that time I had a hit record—*My Fault*. Sold across country for six months.

It was number one from New Orleans to California in the rhythm and blues field. Mostly a Negro market at that time, but I was across Cashbox. When you get New Orleans, Chicago, New York, and California, that's a hit record. The first order in Chicago was ten thousand. So from then I started to boom, and my name got back in circulation, but some of the people in the south didn't realize I was still alive. So I began to get some fan mail from down south, "Brownie, make some more blues with washboard." I had *started out* with harmonica and washboard.

When I came to New York I had met everybody—Pete Seeger, Josh White, Lee Hays, Betty Sanders, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly. To tell you the truth I lived with these people, 'til I moved from them to Leadbelly's house. He lived in a place on 6th Avenue and 8th Street, in a big old loft. I lived with Lead two years, me and Sonny. Lead said, "I'll take you guys in. I get enough to eat over here. Come on over and eat some soul food." So we lived with Lead and Martha and I met all the people in the folk field, Burl Ives, Sis Cunningham, people like that. We joined up with Woody and called us the *Woody Guthrie Singers*. Sonny, myself, and Woody. At that time Moe Asch was putting out night sessions, everybody got ten bucks, play anything you wanted to play. That was Disc Records. Then we did some for Stinson . . . there's a lot of sides we did with Lead that was never released, and I think Stinson still has them.

Then I opened up a school in '48 called *The Home of the Blues* in New York on 125th Street, went in partnership with a fellow and I did pretty good for a couple of years. Then I bought them all out and called it *B.M. Studio*. Moved to the east side, 125th and Madison, where I got married.

After Sonny joined *Finians Rainbow* I formed a trio called *Three B's*. We worked for six dollars a night in Harlem, wasn't too bad. Then I



## Stranger Blues

by Walter "Brownie" McGhee

Intro

I'm a stran-ger here just blowed in your-town -

(fill-in) I'm a stran-ger here

just be- (fill-in) just be-

cause I'm a stran-ger ev-ry - bod-y wants to dog me round (turnabout-use intro)

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\* A fill-in is a short instrumental break used to "fill in" the holes between vocal phrases or as Brownie puts it, "fills are like an answer to my singing, like I'm talking to myself." Here's one of Brownie's favorite fills which can be used in Stranger Blues at the places marked (fill-in).



migrated to Jersey and formed a band called *Brownie McGhee and His Mighty House Rockers*. Had washboard, guitar, and piano in the *Three B's*, then I added a drummer, a bass and a saxophone for the *Mighty House Rockers*. I was playing electric guitar then. During this time I cut some records—sold pretty good—Big Bill's *I Feel So Good* and Brownie's *Blues*. Did a hell of a lot of things with the *Mighty Rockers*. The people that knew I used to do it said, "Hey, why don't you play *John Henry* no more?" We had a certain amount of white following in Jersey and, my band being built around me, they could play anything that I led. So I did *John Henry*, *Midnight Speical*, and all those things, but when I got my audience I'd sing nothing but my songs. I could adjust to a band just as quick as I could do anything. I never was a lone cat. I could meet a drummer, piano player, saxophone player, and we could fall in line, and I had some of the best.

Now Leadbelly had something to sell, he had a goldmine, but people didn't realize it until after his death. Some of the Negroes felt that he was in a bag. They didn't realize it, but Lead kept a culture alive. What we were doing in the blues field, I stuck with it. The change changed, but I didn't change. This is the thing that made it for real, and I never changed. I been doing the same thing for thirty years. You got to get better. If you get worse, man, shame on you. The content that goes into the form has to be real.

I remember I was trying to sell Savoy some of the same stuff that B.B. King come out with later. They said, "We don't want that, Brownie, we want country blues." As soon as B.B. King come out with a song called *Three O'Clock in the Morning*: "Brownie, can you play that?" I said "No, I can't play that! I come here trying to sell you that, wailing on the high notes, you said you don't want that stuff. Too modern. I can do that but why do I want to do it behind somebody?" He just wanted me to capitalize on somebody else's popularity. Wanted to get in on the market. I said, "Listen. Don't you have no ideas of your own?"