



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

SONNY'S HARP

Sonny Terry was the most famous of all the East Coast blues harp players, and is still a household name in these pages. For this installment, I'll continue the profiles of master harmonica players that I began last time (with Chicago bluesman Big Walter Horton) and look at Sonny Terry's life and music.

Sonny was born Saunders Terrell in 1911 in Greensboro, Georgia. His father played jigs and reels on harmonica, and taught the instrument to Sonny, who had also been singing at church tent meetings. When two separate accidents blinded him in boyhood, the harmonica was his only solace. "In them days I just as soon died - except for my harmonica. It was like a friend who didn't give a damn if I could see or not," he said.

He first heard the blues in Shelby, N.C., and after learning the style, began going to Raleigh and Durham to play for the hat on street corners. He met Blind Boy Fuller and Gary Davis there in 1934, and moved to the city soon thereafter to play, mostly with Fuller.

Terry's long recording career began in 1937 when he and Fuller went to New York City to cut sides for Vocalion and the American Record Company. The following year, he took part in John Hammond's groundbreaking *Spirituals to Swing* concert at Carnegie Hall.

After returning to Durham, Terry met guitarist Brownie McGhee, with whom he was to form a long partnership. They cemented their relationship when Blind Boy Fuller died in 1941, and a year later moved to New York at the invitation of the Almanac Singers.

There they were embraced by the folk music scene that included Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, the Lomaxes and others, and began performing and recording regularly. Terry also had a part in the 1946 Broadway pro-

duction of *Finian's Rainbow*, which ran for over 1000 performances, and later in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with McGhee.

By the 1950s, they were performing outside of New York City and recording for several labels. By that time, Sonny was one of the best known blues harmonica players, even though the duo were considered too folk by some black blues fans.

Sonny and Brownie were in their prime in the 1960s, playing folk and blues festivals and producing a steady stream of recordings. In 1975, Sonny and author Kent Cooper produced the book *Sonny Terry's Country Blues Harmonica*, in which Sonny movingly tells his life story and his harmonica techniques are detailed. Personal differences broke up the duo at about this time, although they continued to perform occasionally.

In the early 1980s, Terry retired from touring and rarely performed, although in 1984 he recorded *Whoopin'* with Willie Dixon and Johnny Winter. He also played in the soundtracks of the movies *The Color Purple*, *The Jerk*, and *Crossroads*. He died in 1986, after having enjoyed one the most successful careers of any blues harmonica player.

According to Kent Cooper's book, Sonny used the "pucker" method of playing. In addition to his soloing ability, he was also a skillful accompanist, being able to melt into the background during the vocals or another player's solos. Sonny also had an amazing "whoopin" routine in which he quickly alternated between hooting and playing the harp (fellow Piedmont blower Peg Leg Sam also did this; these days, Madcat Ruth is only one I've heard who can pull it off). For a good example, listen to *Sonny's Squall* on *Midnight Special*.

"That Good Old Jelly Roll" is from the duo's LP *You Hear Me Talkin'*. It's an excellent example of one of the countless variants that Sonny often used in slow blues. He opens with his trademark wail on the 4 draw, and then breaks into double notes on 5 & 6 blow. The rest of the solo is largely based on triplet rhythms and even subdivided triplets.

These rhythms often crop up in slow blues. Triplets are counted as "One triplet, two triplet," etc, and subdivided triplets are counted like this: "One and trip and let and," etc. Because subdivided triplets can be tricky to learn, I have a few exercises dealing with them for you to try. After you're comfortable with them, you should be ready for the transcription.

SOME SUGGESTED SONNY TERRY RECORDINGS

Complete Recordings, Vol 2, 2000, Document 5657

Complete Recordings, Vol 1, 1996, Document 5230

The Folkway Years, 1944-1963, 1991, Smithsonian Folkways 40033

Whoopin', 1984, Alligator 4734

At The 2nd Fret, 1963, Fantasy/Original Blues Classics 561 (orig. Prestige 7803)

ON VIDEO

Whoopin the Blues 1958-74, 1977, Vestapol 13057



