

They Mark the End of an Era in Folk Music

Reviewed by
CELLA COPPIN-ALBERSON

"All songs are folk songs to me because I never heard a blues singer. This was the opening remark of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry as they introduced themselves to the Raven Gallery, where they played two weekend engagements. Partners of 25 years standing, Brownie and Sonny descended from a rich tradition of folk singing, a tradition particularly American and highly stylized. Its roots are in Negro blues and American history. The oral tradition of handing down songs and ballads from generation to generation has reached a synthesis in these two folk-people."

"THEY ARE AMONG the last authentic communicators of a musical lore which is now changing and evolving into a new lore. For the South is changing and American folk ways are changing. Saturday night hootenannies are seldom more than a few hours' drive away and if one hasn't a car there is always a record player. Guitar and banjo sales have mushroomed in the current revival of folk music. Individual balladeers change songs as they interest and perform them and make them their own."

Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry created most of their repertoire themselves and through years of working together, they have formed a kind of lyric folk music unmistakably their own. Sonny, who is blind, plays a harmonica. But no ordinary harmonica—it is more like an extension of his own voice. Like an extra hand. He makes it talk, howl, chuckle and hoot. He sings and plays simultaneously, and when they do together, the great folk hero Hohn Henry, one can practically see and hear silver hammers flying from Sonny's harmonica.

Brownie plays the guitar—just one guitar but it sounds like an entire string and percussion band. One single bar of Brownie's blues contains myriad nuances, and the rhythms he pulls out of his instrument evoke laughter, tenderness, and sorrow. But not the sorrow of despair—the free-flowing universal sorrow that is the soul of "the blues," a gentle yet firmly sustaining rhythm that can laugh at itself despite misfortune. ("If I'm A Fool, I Don't Fool about The One I Love"). Brownie's voice is warm and mellow, like dark honey. Sonny's is higher, more wailing and abalances the softer tones of Brownie.

Twenty-five years is a long time to be partners and the partnership of McGhee and Terry reveals the fruit of many years of being together. Together they have the flawless time of an express train coming down the home track. Their joint sound is one of mutual understanding and is filled with the humor of two men who can't fool each other.

In a paradoxical setting of contemporary modern art forms Brownie explained why he sings and plays "the blues." "I was born with 'em. I was born with the blues. Mama had 'em, Daddy had 'em, and now I'm married and I live with 'em. I'm not ashamed."

For Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, "the blues" are not a matter of bitterness and despair. "The blues" have always been a world of emotion, strong with tenderness, wry humor and hope. They can be played sweet and hot or they can

have the mournful howl of a freight train in the night. "The blues" are like a familiar stranger everywhere in life. They speak of the isolation every man experiences at different moments in his life — dramatic moments when man is pitted alone against the odds of loneliness, self-inquiry and injustices whether it be social, political, or love unrequited.

"Why Don't You Sing with the Brains You Were Born With?" and "But That's All Right" (I don't worry 'Cause that would be the death of me), "Let Me Tell You People, I'm Going to Get Out of the Hole I'm In," "Goin' to Chain the Lock on the Door," "Backwater Blues" — "the blues" don't mimic words. In folk music they are the bed-

rock of hope, consolation, trouble and trial. They can be so late in time of hurt. "She's gone, she's gone / She won't be back no more/Well, when she left the blues walked in my door."

In folk music (people's music) "the blues" are what make things happen. They are a man's personal voice of honor. They can be a friend or they can break up marriages.

Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry are lyric folk singers and are authentic balladeers in the same oral tradition that gave us Big Bill Broonzy and Leadbelly. The roots of the current folk revival are in the very songs that have flowed for years from the

supple hands and voices of singers like McGhee and Terry. They come from where the blues began.

In "The Ballad Book," MacEdward Leach says, "The ballad is in one way the ultimate in dramatic expression, for it is the universal. It reveals man becoming a man and facing one moment in life that destroys all or reveals all. What matter the details that bring this moment about? They are all different and yet all the same in that they bring man to his dramatic moment."

WHAT COULD BE more telling of character than the McGhee-Terry blues? "When You Lose Your Money, Please Don't Lose Your Mind."

They are apostles of American folk music for they sing the authentic blues. Blues not of pessimism and bitterness but of pride and belonging. They sing intimately of the blues, they mourn and mock them but only to play them all the harder.

THEY DO NOT dwell upon the grim aspects of misfortune which everyone encounters sooner or later. In folk ballad tradition they state the situation and concentrate on climactic action, personal response and psychological solution. They do not sing a music of complaint and weariness. They have a heartening way of treating the grimmest situations with melodic equanimity and concentrating on giving tragedy a fast-moving

Miss boogie beat as if to put a joke between hero and trouble. "Hey, Hey, See What You Done," "Blackwater Blues" — these are only a few of a repertoire which has formed the foundation of America's folk music. They make the inmates of rock 'n roll run for cover.

Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry will appear once more at the Raven Gallery this weekend—Nov. 1, 2 and 3. For anyone interested in the rudiments of jazz and folk music, the Raven Gallery is the place to go.

The first woman to be honored with a memorial statue in Statuary Hall in the U. S. Capitol building was the educator and reformer, Frances Elizabeth Willard. Each state has the right to select for inclusion in the Hall two persons who have been prominent in the state's history.

Professor Gives Talk on 'Tragedy'

Dr. Lester G. Crocker, dean of the graduate school and chairman of the department of Romance languages, will present a public lecture, "The Substance of Tragedy" at 1 p.m. Friday, Nov. 8, at Oakland University. Crocker is a distinguished scholar and author of books on writers of the French Enlightenment.

HE WAS a Guggenheim Fellow and Fulbright Research Scholar at the University of Paris from 1964-1965 and a member of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton from 1958-1959. He received his doctor of philosophy degree from the University of California in 1950 and earned the Certificat de

literature française at the University of Paris in 1953. He has taught at Queens, Swarthmore and Goucher colleges. The lecture will be held in 186 North Foundation Hall. It is open to students, faculty, staff and the public. There is no charge for admission.

Mints in the United States during the first seven months of 1963 produced 196,388,700 five-cent coins. To produce these coins, which contain 75 per cent copper and 25 per cent nickel, more than 1,500,000 pounds of copper and 500,000 pounds of nickel were used.

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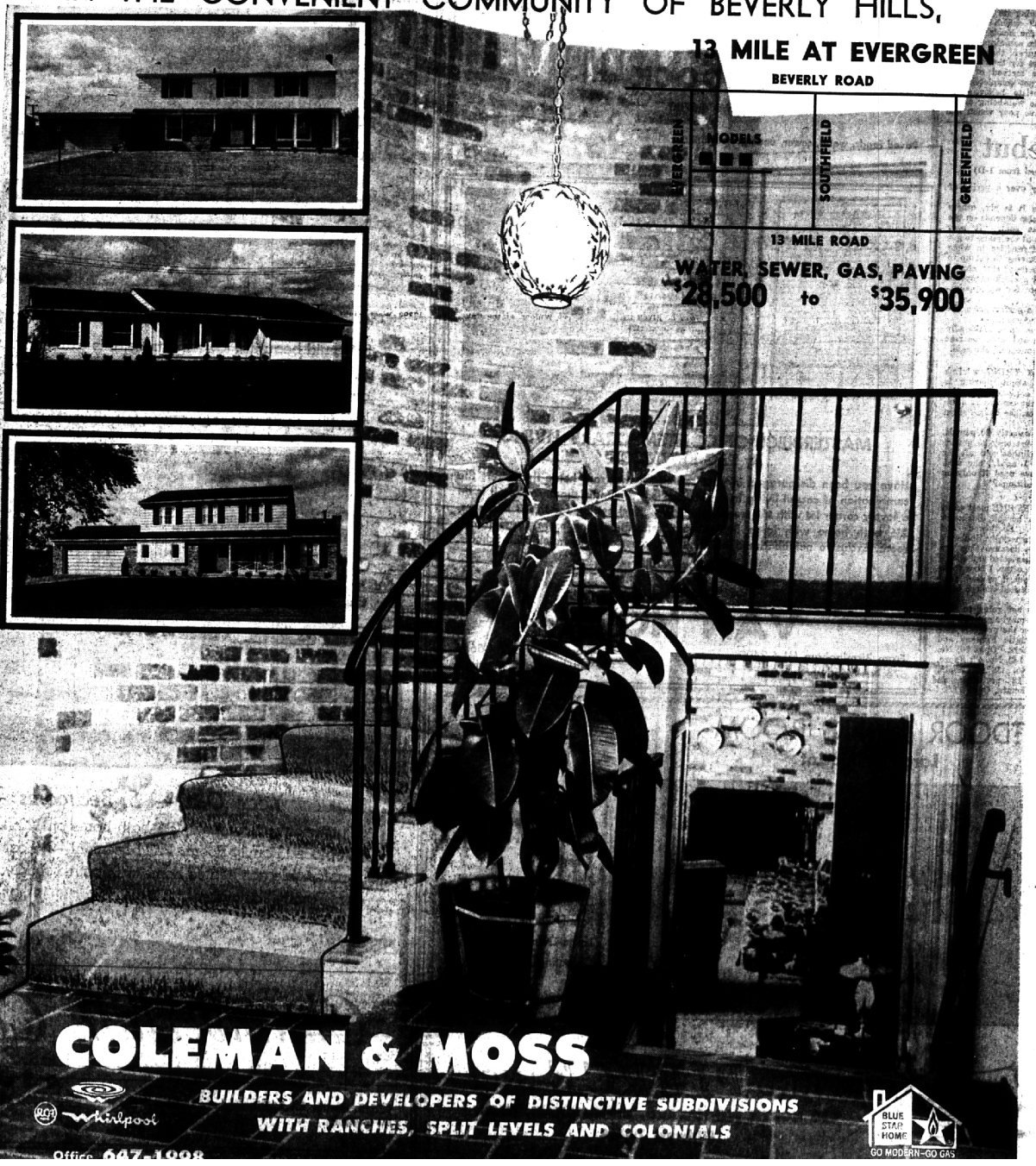
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