

“Today!”--Mississippi John Hurt (1966)

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Essay by Mary Frances Hurt and Ed Levine, with special thanks to Ethan Levin (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Mississippi John Hurt

Hearing the music of Mississippi John Hurt feels like sitting on a porch in the old south listening to a warm, caring grandfather tell stories. And John's stories go way back. John's mother, Mary Jane McCain, was a slave and it is no accident that she, along with several of John's extended family, had McCain as their last name. When Mary Jane McCain was a slave, her owners were the McCain family, the same McCains from which Senator John McCain is descended. Despite those humble beginnings, Mississippi John Hurt eventually emerged as one of the most beloved and most admired of American musical treasures.

John's first recordings date back to 1928, when he did some sessions for Okeh records in Memphis and New York. These records sold well but, soon after their release, the Depression hit and sales plummeted. John's musical career was cut short and he returned to Avalon, Mississippi. For the next 35 years, John played at small clubs, at parties, and on the porch of The Valley Store but there was not a living to be earned in it. In order to make a living, John, like so many southern black men of the era, did hard manual labor, working as a sharecropper, doing odd jobs and, later, tending cows for the owner of the land on which he lived. John did this for 35 years with no expectation that things would ever change.

It is fortunate for all of us that things finally did.

In 1963, again 35 years after the Okeh recordings, America was experiencing a folk and blues revival. Young, hippie entrepreneurs were eagerly searching for the next great American musical breakthrough. One of those entrepreneurs was a guy named Tom Hoskins. When Hopkins happened across the old Okeh recordings of Mississippi John, there was no doubt, as far as he was concerned, that he had struck gold.

John, on Okeh, had written and performed a song called "Avalon," which included the line, "Avalon, my hometown, always on my mind." Given that the artist's name was

Mississippi John Hurt, it made sense that this town, his hometown, would be in Mississippi. Tom Hoskins learned that there had been a railroad stop for an Avalon in Carroll County, Mississippi, so he headed there at once and found the man he'd been seeking.

Mississippi John Hurt's second career in music was an immediate, resounding success. He was loved by both fans and artists alike. John Sebastian's group, The Lovin' Spoonful, is named after a line in Hurt's "Coffee Blues." Folk singer/songwriter Chris Smither has talked about spending countless hours moving a record needle back and forth to learn Mississippi John's songs and learning to pick in his style. Doc and Merle Watson, great artists in their own right, also recognized Hurt as one of their main musical influences; they loved him and always referred to him as "Uncle John."

Yet, despite the myriad of artists and fans that lauded over him, John Hurt remained humble and unassuming. When playing in clubs, he used to mingle with the audience between sets, sincerely thanking them for coming to hear him perform.

Mississippi John Hurt's lyrics range from the haunting to the hilarious. "Candy Man," a song that he also recorded for Okeh in 1928, offers a light-hearted, comical depiction of a true ladies man: "*Oh, his stick of candy don't melt away/It just gets better, so the ladies say.*" On a more serious note, his song "You Don't Want Me Baby" is about the most difficult times of his marriage. The stark imagery of that song evokes a sense of helpless longing, which is so often an element of love gone wrong: "*The sun go down, ain't this a lonesome place/The sun go down, ain't this a lonesome place/ So lonesome here, can't see my baby's face.*" The song "Louis Collins" tells the story of a murder. No one has ever found the actual "Louis Collins" but some say it was based on a story John once overheard. What is certain, though not widely known, is that much of the song's story mirrors another tragedy: the murder of John Hurt's daughter, Idella May Hurt (or Ida May, as she was usually called). The events of that real tragedy juxtaposed with the fictional song, expertly picked and built around a tender melody, emphasize the haunting irony of a hard life ended by a senseless killing--"*Oh kind friends, oh ain't it hard, to see poor Louis in a new graveyard.*"

The collection of songs on the "Today!" album are like a road map, depicting the hardships, the fun and the tragedies of John's own life.

As impressive as his lyrics are, Mississippi John Hurt is most regarded for his picking style. John's ability to combine a distinct base line, played mostly with his thumb, plus a separate and distinct melody make his one guitar sound like two. Still, it is not just the musicianship nor the writing but the whole package that transports us. The easy style of play and turn of phrase, combined with exquisite timing and a voice that makes one wish he was your actual granddad, makes it nearly impossible to hear Mississippi John Hurt's music without smiling.

Mississippi John Hurt's "Today!" was an immediate hit in the folk and blues sphere when it came out in 1966. It is still wildly popular and will likely remain so for the foreseeable

future. Seven of the twelve songs on the LP were written by Mississippi John Hurt: "Pay Day"; "I'm Satisfied"; "Candy Man"; "Talking Casey"; "Coffee Blues"; "Louis Collins," and "If You Don't Want Me Baby." The other five: "Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor," "Corrina, Corrina," "Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight," "Spike Driver Blues" and "Beulah Land" are all traditional songs. That being said, these traditional songs are so much in the Mississippi John Hurt style, they seem like his original creations.

"Today!" offers an excellent first glimpse into the repertoire of Mississippi John Hurt. It is most accurately categorized as American acoustic folk and blues, although Hurt's work often travels beyond such boundaries. John used to say he played whatever sounded good. One thing for sure though, whatever Mississippi John Hurt played sounded much, much better than good.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.