

“Blind Joe Death”—John Fahey (1959, 1964, 1967)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

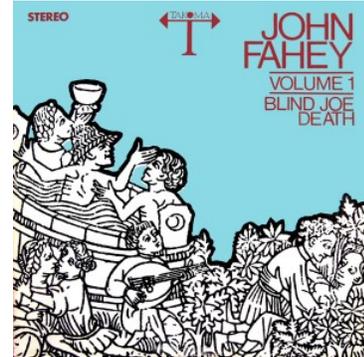
Essay by Steve Lowenthal (guest post)*



Original 1959 release



John Fahey



1967 release

When dealing with “Blind Joe Death,” the debut record by John Fahey, one must understand a certain amount of context. The year was 1959 and the guitarist was 17 years old. The album was recorded after hours at an Episcopal church with a girl he was desperately infatuated with pressing “record” on the reel-to-reel. Fahey had never performed professionally. The album was pressed in an edition of 100 copies and sold over the course of three years at local thrift stores around his hometown of Takoma Park, Maryland, and during his all-night shift at Martin’s Esso, a gas station and the only business open all night for miles around. In many ways it’s a miracle that an album from such obscure origins continues to have such immense impact. There was nothing like “Blind Joe Death” before--a new music for solo guitar. The music needed to be heard. And the music was, despite the many flaws of its creator.

Fahey’s intentions had nothing to do with commercialism, but rather a desperate attempt to document the guitarist’s music, to capture the moment, because no one else would possibly be interested in doing so. Fahey invented his own style of instrumental guitar music, borrowing the elements of dissonance from modern composers, the finger-picking technique of bluegrass and country, as well as the structures and themes of the blues. Rather than play solely traditional and re-workings, Fahey composed his own pieces from the start, with songs like “Sligo River Blues” echoing his own local folklore. The original album’s plain white sleeve with the name “John Fahey” on one side and “Blind Joe Death” on the other was an absurdist prank of a white suburbanite appropriating the tropes of country bluesmen, such as Blind Blake and Blind Willie Johnson. In this tongue-in-cheek tribute, Fahey shows his own deep reverence for the raw emotional expression of the music.

But Fahey’s own vision was not the blues, most strongly evidenced on the track “The Transcendental Waterfall,” an extended meditation incorporating radical structures not heard before on guitar. Fahey’s approach was a pastiche that leaned on familiar melodies and simple phrasings, leading him to dub his style American Primitive in an ode to his

self-taught approach. He was not the product of fine schooling, and his command of his instrument remained tentative at this early stage. Not bound by limitations of technique, though, Fahey's imaginative interpretation of Takoma Park of the 1950's was a nod to the profound influence his childhood had, a trait that followed Fahey throughout the rest of the 20th Century. Fahey's self-produced and distributed recordings were unusual for the time, and placed him in the company of only a few fellow visionaries such as Harry Partch and Sun Ra.

Fahey was an outsider, belonging to neither the music industry nor a community of like-minded artists. Alone in his work, Fahey, an only child from a broken home, used music as a therapeutic release, his albums, littered with his absurdist take on blues mythos added more layers to his bizarre presentation. As an alter-ego, Blind Joe Death represented all the negative emotions inherent in the troubled Fahey: the anger of isolation, the fear of rejection and the suffering he felt at the hands of his father and a society that didn't understand him. Using the "Rebel Without A Cause" blueprint, the teenage Fahey slicked his hair back like a greaser and tucked cigarettes into his shirtsleeve. His exterior hid a pensive, thoughtful young man, who felt at home discussing theology at his Episcopal church.

The album in its original form, self-released by Fahey on his Takoma label, is now a collector's item sold for thousands of dollars. Much like the sought-after hidden 78s of Skip James and Charlie Patton, Fahey's own debut is now a coveted artifact possessed by a handful of devoted collectors.

The music was re-recorded by Fahey in '67, and re-released many times over the decades, remaining as unique as it did upon its initial release. To successive generations of listeners, Fahey's debut offers a vivid portal to the deep woods of suburban Maryland, a place he found stepped in its own mysticism. Magruder Park, the Sligo Creek, and the Adelphi Mill Pond are all part of the story and featured in the titles of his works. Fahey's Americana is wrapped in a self-mythology, which adds to his enduring mystery.

Fahey's instrumental odes to the existential void of his upbringing is a blank canvas, one in which listeners can paint their own details on top of. The music continues to resonate strongly, generations after the fact. Fahey had no interest in catering his music for an audience. In fact, when the album was created, it was hard to imagine that the guitarist was doing it for anyone other than himself and perhaps a handful of friends. These innovations and insights took place entirely outside the boundaries of the music industry. Fahey had the wherewithal and courage to pioneer on his own terms so early in his musical development.

By the end of the 20th Century, solo guitar and artist-run labels were ubiquitous in the American music landscape. In 1959, these concepts were virtually non-existent. This kind of expression comes from a need to exist rather than a quest for fame. John Fahey was a young man who felt as though he didn't fit in to suburban society. His first album is an ode to this existential landscape and the transcendental joys of his more naturalistic escapes to the woods and parks surrounding him. Like no other album before or since,

“Blind Joe Death” speaks to an outsider perspective, for all those who suffer but also to the joys and solace of knowing other kinds of beauty.

Steve Lowenthal has been a longtime music journalist writing for “Spin,” “The Village Voice,” “Vice” and many other publications including his own “Swingset Magazine.” Lowenthal is the author of “Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey- American Guitarist” (Chicago Review Press, 2014) and currently runs the VDSQ record label out of NYC.

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