

“Texas Sharecropper and Songster”—Mance Lipscomb (1960)

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Essay by Marty Gunther (guest post)*



Mance Lipscomb

Released on Nov. 3, 1960, with a press run of just 250 copies, “Texas Sharecropper & Songster” --a 14-song LP--launched the recording career of Mance Lipscomb, an acoustic guitarist and vocalist who had already devoted 50 years of his life in what’s known as the “songster” tradition. An institution that evolved after the Civil War, it was created primarily by African-American musicians who’d gained the freedom to crisscross the US and make a living performing a mix of folk, dance, blues, Tin Pan Alley and ballads to eager audiences.

But the significance of this once-limited release is far more important than the exposure it gave to an artist whose repertoire included an estimated 350 tunes and endured for another 26 years. It also served as the premiere release by Arhoolie Records, which grew into one of the most important independent purveyors of blues and roots music in America--so much so, in fact, that its catalog was acquired by the Smithsonian Institution in 2016 and is now part of its Smithsonian Folkways label.

The Arhoolie success story is amazing in itself. The label was a label of love created by Chris Strachwitz in El Cerrito, California. Born in the region of Silesia--former German territory that’s now part of Poland--he fell in love with the exotic rhythms of American jazz after hearing it via Armed Forces Radio and emigrated to the US with his parents after World War II.

A naturalized citizen who was drafted into the US Army, Strachwitz’s focus turned to blues and R&B while attending Pomona College and frequenting clubs in neighboring Los Angeles. After his military discharge, he earned multiple degrees at University of California-Berkeley, where he booked his favorite musicians to entertain at football games.

Strachwitz's interest in record-making took root in the late '50s, when he served an apprenticeship with legendary San Francisco producer Bob Geddins and assisted him in capturing bluesman Jesse Fuller, jazz saxophonist Sonny Simmons and others on tape. One of his friends during that era was musicologist Robert "Mack" McCormick, the man credited with "discovering" Lightnin' Hopkins, one of the most prolific artists to emerge from the songster tradition.

Strachwitz had seen Hopkins perform frequently. Enamored, he traveled to Lightnin's native Texas in 1959 in an effort to make a record. After his arrival, however, he quickly realized he didn't have the necessary capital or equipment to achieve his goal.

He founded Arhoolie in 1960, using a name suggested by McCormick that incorporates "hoolie," a synonym for field holler. Properly equipped with an inexpensive Japanese reel-to-reel tape, an Elektrovoice 664 microphone and a cheap Harmony guitar, he returned to Texas to learn that Hopkins had just departed for a tour of the West Coast. Undeterred, Strachwitz decided to record Mance Lipscomb, another McCormick "find," instead.

The son of a former slave and born in 1895, Lipscomb possessed a distinctive, pleasant voice with solid range and a unique "dead thumb" fingerpicking technique on guitar, a skill that provides a steady rhythm pattern on the fifth or sixth string. He learned to play early in life, but had toiled as a sharecropper on the outskirts of Navasota. Popular locally in what he termed his "precinct," he appeared most often at Saturday-night suppers--parties hosted on a rotating basis by other tenant farmers after a hard week in the fields.

Strachwitz recorded "Texas Songster and Sharecropper" the first night he met Lipscomb in Navasota. A Mance original, titled "Freddie," opens the album's action. Sung in tenor voice and delivered primarily from the first person, the song's a rag that describes the title character returning home to find his woman in bed with another man. He pulls out a gun and shoots her dead as she pleads for her life, then goes hunting for his rival, noting: "He made me mad/I got sad." The tune ends with Freddie recounting the crime to his father, who says: "I'll tell ya what I'm gonna do/If the judge gives you 40 years/I'll have him pardon you."

Lipscomb's voice shifts to baritone for the self-penned "Sugar Babe, It's All Over Now," another song that violates current morals as it announces the end of another relationship--not by shooting, but by inflicting a beating because the woman "made five dollars and give me two." Mance's brief mid-tune instrumental guitar break shines like a diamond in the gloom of his tale. Three blues tunes follow, all of which are now entries into the great American songbook, beginning with St. Louis Jimmy Oden's frequently covered "Going Down Slow" before moving on to Big Joe Williams' "Baby Please Don't Go" and then Lipscomb's own sexually charged classic "Rock Me All Night Long."

Mance dips into his Tin Pan Alley trick bag next with the sprightly "Ain't Gonna Rain No Mo'." First recorded by Wendell Hall, its origins trace back decades earlier. And it's considered to be

the first major hit ever broadcast on radio, selling more than two million copies in the US when released in 1923. The first side of the disc concludes with a stellar take on “Jack O’Diamonds (Is a Hard Card to Play),” a gambling tune popularized by Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926 and later a mainstay for John Lee Hooker and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott and others.

Mild sexual innuendo bubbles under the surface for “Shake, Shake, Mama,” which opens the album’s B side. A love song that praises “a little bitty woman with hips just like a snake,” it precedes the horrific “Ella Speed,” a tune that revisits a real-life murder that occurred in the 1890s, when the title lady was gunned down by Louis “Bull” Martin in a New Orleans gambling den. The incident was so notorious that several versions of the story have appeared on record, the most prominent by Lead Belly in the ‘40s. It’s distinctly different than this uncredited tune, but shares the same title.

The mood brightens for the jaunty “One Thin Dime,” which is up next with the singer traveling through East St. Louis with the solitary coin in his pocket, unwilling to spend it because he’s saving it for his lady. It flows into a number that fuses the rag “Going to Louisiana” with the Ma Rainey blues classic, “See See Rider.” Lipscomb shifts to baritone again for a sprightly take on Cow Cow Davenport’s familiar “Mama Don’t Allow” before addressing unrequited love in “Ain’t It Hard.” The disc concludes with the Mance original, “‘Bout a Spoonful,” which finds him yearning for another sip after he drunk “bad whiskey” all night long.

At the time of its release, as Strachwitz described, Lipscomb was “an unknown, but remarkable regional songster, blues singer and guitarist”--something that would change quickly after Mance appeared on Arhoolie vinyl, which was given the catalog number F1001.

Strachwitz and a couple of friends spent hours at his kitchen table applying the gummed cover art onto black jackets to create the first 250 copies of “Texas Sharecropper and Songster” and inserting liner notes written by McCormick that are so extensive they’re among the lengthiest ever to accompany a single-disc release.

At age 65, Lipscomb eventually became an “overnight” sensation during the burgeoning folk music revival. Until his death at age 80 in 1976, he was a revered performer at festivals and clubs across the US. And from that modest beginning, Arhoolie went on to become an understated powerhouse that released more than 700 records and furthered the careers of Mance and such first-generation bluesmen as Mississippi Fred McDowell and Big Joe Williams, and rising talents like Earl Hooker, Charlie Musselwhite and John Littlejohn, and the zydeco superstar Clifton Chenier, plus a host of other luminaries across the blues and roots spectrum.

The disc that started it all, “Texas Sharecropper and Songster,” has been reissued on vinyl by Arhoolie several times since its first appearance but never as a CD in the US. In 2013, however, the original 14 tracks were licensed to the Japanese imprint P-Vine, which released an expanded version of the title with 12 additional cuts culled from the artist’s later work.

Lipscomb's music remains as vital today as it was when first recorded, notes Jontavious Willis, a young African-American acoustic guitarist who's an anachronism in the modern blues world because he plays in the songster tradition. In his early 20s as this essay was written, Willis is a musical scholar far older than his tender years. His 2019 debut album, "Spectacular Class," received multiple nominations in the 2020 Blues Music Awards.

"I listen to Mance Lipscomb a lot," he says. "He's a good representation of the early songsters--the way most musicians played in the early '20s. They were influenced by blues, but could do any kind of music. And what sets him apart is that he plays in keys that nobody plays today. His musical vocabulary is outrageous."

Marty Gunther is a member of the board of directors of the Charlotte (NC) Blues Society with an extensive knowledge of the blues dating back to his attendance of the Newport, RI, festivals in the 1960s. A longtime member of the Chicago blues community, he's a former professional harmonica player who now serves as senior writer for "Blues Blast Magazine" and his "Red Hot 'n Blues Reviews" column appears in both the Charlotte society newsletter and in "Chicago Blues Guide."

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