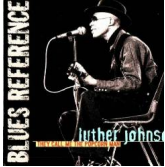


Luther 'Snake Boy' Johnson - They Call Me The Popcorn Man (1999)

Written by bluesever

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1 Lonesome In My Bedroom 2 Little Queenie 3 They Call Me the Popcorn Man 4 Honey Bee 5 Rock Me Slow and Easy 6 Long Distance Call 7 Hush Hush 8 She's My Babe 9 Jammin' With Willie 10 Please Don't Take My Baby Nowhere 11 Please Give Me That Love 12 They Call Me the Popcorn Man 13 Got My Mojo Working Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson (vocals, guitar) Hubert Sumlin, Lonnie Brooks (guitar) Little Mack Simmons (harmonica) Willie Mabon (piano) Fred Below (drums)

Luther "Snake" Johnson was a Georgia-born guitarist who made a name for himself in the mid-to late-60s as Muddy Waters's guitarist. After leaving Muddy, he settled in Boston and led his own band for a time in the 70s before falling ill; he died from cancer in March 1976. His role as one of Muddy's most important latter-day fretmen has been somewhat overlooked, both because his sparse, primal style fell out of favor with mainstream fans and because he's become confused with later Waters guitarist Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson. That's a shame; he was among the last of Muddy's guitar players who specialized in the dark, brooding sound of "deep blues"--a term Muddy used to describe blues of intense emotional fervor, strong rhythmic impetus, and a commitment to honesty of expression rather than rococo tricks or crowd-pleasing flamboyance. One of Johnson's most attractive qualities is his ability to bring equal emotional fire to celebratory houserockers and introspective soul baring. The stylistic juxtaposition is a bit strained, and the cut could have been a throwaway, but it's redeemed by an endearing back-alley primitivism as Simmons wails away behind Johnson's elemental single-note soloing and the rhythm section lays down a churning boogie.

Johnson is at his best, though, when he digs into the fervid passion of a slow blues. His masterpiece here is the vaguely John Lee Hooker-ish "Please Don't Take My Baby Nowhere." This haunting meditation on loneliness and loss is performed solo by Johnson, accompanied only by his guitar. It opens with whispery, rapid-fire arpeggios skittering beneath Johnson's lonesome moans, more melodic than Hooker's modal drone and with a propulsive forward impetus. The guitar lines ascend into chords that scream like a train whistle then splinter into

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metallic sparks, finally cascading down into a full-bodied final chord as Johnson begs the train to leave his woman behind with him. It's a thrilling example of the primal folk intensity of Delta blues transplanted to an urban musical setting.

The balance of the disc doesn't quite match up to the rocking exuberance of "Rock Me Slow and Easy" and "Hush, Hush" or the throbbing emotiveness of the Muddy Waters tunes and "Lonesome in My Bedroom" and "Please Don't Take My Baby Nowhere." But it may be Johnson's greatest attribute that even most of his less stellar performances manage to impress. Chuck Berry's "Little Queenie" again finds Johnson straining to fit into a style that's not his own--his down-home vocal phrasing can't approximate Berry's oily, urbane macho, and he can't seem to find the right combination of aggression and fleetness to make this tune rock instead of pound--but the overall exuberance of the participants again redeems the tune.

Likewise "They Call Me the Popcorn Man" is another straight shuffle, but this time the lyrics are more imaginative than usual ("They call me the popcorn man / I can sell it ten cents a can . . ."). "Please Give Me That Love," despite references to the Funky Chicken, is a standard up-tempo blues (Johnson never played a nonblues lick in his life) revved up into a blast of simmering juke-joint ribaldry. --- chicagoreader.com

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