

Brownsville Blues (Goin' To Brownsville)

Written by bluesever
Sunday, 31 July 2016 10:29 -

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When Big Joe Williams informed Bob Koester of Delmark Records the **Sleepy John Estes** was still living, Koester was naturally skeptical. No doubt, the improbability of Estes being alive kept blues researchers from looking for him. Discographies list 1941 as his last recording date. It was Chicagoan David Blumenthal who found him while making a documentary film in Brownsville, Tennessee. Estes was brought to Chicago for an exploratory recording session. On March 24, 1962 Sleepy John recorded most of the songs on the album including six previously unissued tracks not on the original LP release of Brownsville Blues. Four songs from this session were issued on John's first Delmark release "The Legend of Sleepy John Estes." However, most of the material on Legend was from the June, 1962 group session. The theme of Brownsville Blues is the many people and places of John's hometown. Here is the legendary country blues artist Sleepy John Estes singing as well as ever, still writing blues poetry, and playing guitar better than in former years.

Brownsville Blues

John Adam Estes was born near Ripley, Tennessee on January 25, 1904. His parents were sharecroppers who had sixteen children. Like his brothers and sisters, Estes grew up working his parents' fields. The most traumatic event of his childhood occurred during a baseball game when a stone struck him in the eye. He lost his vision completely in one eye and his other grew worse and worse until, by his fifties, he was left completely blind.



Sleepy John Estes

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Estes' father, who played guitar, was probably the first musician he ever heard. His father showed Estes a few chords, let him play his guitar occasionally, and taught him his first song, a ditty called "Chocolate Drop." Before long Estes had built his own cigar-box instruments on which he practiced. At the age of 19, while working as a field hand, he began to perform professionally. The venues were mostly local parties and picnics, with the accompaniment of Hammie Nixon, a harmonica player, and James "Yank" Rachell, a guitarist and mandolin player. He would continue to work on and off with both musicians for more than fifty years.

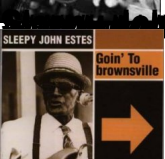
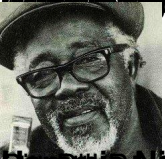


Nixon, Rachell & Estes

Never an outstanding guitarist, Estes relied on his expressive voice to carry his music, and the recordings he made from 1929 on have enormous appeal and remain remarkably accessible today. Estes' records were popular and their sales were good, at least until the Depression deepened and the poor could no longer afford luxuries like phonograph records. Estes made his base in Brownsville where he continued to live and perform, while making regular sorties into Arkansas and Missouri. He went up to Chicago occasionally as well and even claimed to have played for gangster Al Capone, who Estes said was crazy about blues. Despite the popularity of his 1929 records, Estes was not able to record again during the first three years of the 1930s. When he heard that Nixon and Son Bonds had just returned from recording in Chicago, he persuaded Nixon to return to the Windy City and set up a session for him. Finally, in 1934 Estes returned to the studio with Hammie Nixon to record for the Decca label. At the session Estes cut "Someday Baby" and "Drop Down Mama," songs that went on to become blues standards.

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