

J. C. BURRIS

Blues Professor

J. C. Burris has been playing the blues around San Francisco since 1960, yet has remained relatively obscure although he is among the most unique of the country blues performers around today. Reared in the Carolina tradition of the blues, these influences have remained intact in spite of the prevalent West Coast style of blues that has surrounded him. This is due more to the fact that Burris has had minimal contact with other blues musicians than anything else. As a harmonica player, Burris is greatly indebted to Sonny Terry, an uncle, who first taught him to play the harmonica at age seven. Terry's influence seems to have been quite considerable because it is sometimes difficult to tell the two apart. Even Terry has remarked, "If you didn't see him, you'd think he was me."

J. C. Burris was born on a farm in the rocky hills of western North Carolina, near Shelby, in 1928. It was here that his exposure to the primitive instrumentation of the southeastern blues styling was cemented. His usage of the African rhythm bones, for example (two ebony sticks held and clicked together like castanets), is derivative of the rural instrument, the beef bones. These "bones," when played off the harmonica, add a tonal depth and feel, unusual to the blues.

As a child Burris' first recollection of the blues came during harvest when everyone from miles around came to the farm to help gather in the crop. "At night we'd have a corn shuckin'. And when we'd get through with it, everybody would have a big feast. Like we'd be barbecuing as fast as we'd get

the pile of corn shucked up. There'd be about ten gallons of white lightning buried in the corn to get all the people to do it. Then the rest of the night till daylight they'd be playing, the blues, singing, some would dance or do the hand jive."

The hand jive is another primitive form introduced to Burris. It consists of rapid hand and arm movements: patting chest, legs, arms and hands in a melodic mode from a simple progression to one of complexity that entails a high degree of physical stamina and body coordination (seen in the video noted on p.10). From his grandfather, a blacksmith, came the idea of Mr. Jack, a handmade wooden dancing figure fashioned from bits and ends of wooden crates. Mr. Jack's movable limbs dance when he is tapped on the head. With this Burris hums a tune, giving the whole performance a medicine show feel. This unusual bit of folk art has been adored by every audience that has

seen it. Meanwhile, Burris is readying a dancing family of Jack Jr. and Jackie Mae to tag along with Mr. Jack.

The blues influence in Burris' life has been largely attributed to Sonny Terry. Terry, the brother of J.C.'s mother, lived in nearby Shelby, North Carolina. Consequently he spent a great deal of time during the 30's on the Burris farm. The relationship between uncle and nephew was close. "I used to lead Uncle Son around; most of the family would be in the fields working and I was the oldest boy there at the house and I'd walk Sonny to the store so no car would hit him." In turn, Terry would buy young J.C. harmonicas and teach him little songs. Sometimes he brought guitarist Blind Boy Fuller along to the farm. Recalls Burris, "I was nine years old when Blind Boy Fuller came to the farm. I used to sit on his lap and light his pipe for him. Big Bill Broonzy used to come down there too with my uncle. He'd come down in the

fall of the year and stay about a month.”

In 1937 Burris' mother died quite unexpectedly, thus forcing a great upheaval in the family unit of six children. His father was forced to move to Bessemer City, where an aunt could care for the children while those able sharecropped tobacco. Here J.C. remained until 1949, when at 21 years of age he moved to New York City, where Sonny Terry had settled some years earlier.

In New York Burris began working in the garment district, and in his free time he played harmonica without realizing he would one day embark on a music career. New York at that time had a circle of bluesmen that included, besides Terry, Sticks and Brownie McGhee, Rev. Gary Davis, Leroy Dallas and Alec Seward. When Burris decided to seriously take up the blues, Terry offered his help.

“He taught me how to change my wind in the harmonica, how to get my

breath and keep from choking up. A lot of people, they blow out and choke up, and then they have to stop and get their breath and play. He told me, ‘You losin’ too much in between there.’ That’s the way he learned to do that hoop.”

By 1953 Burris was playing harmonica in the city streets and occasionally house parties up in Harlem and Brooklyn, or over in New Jersey. The following year he made his first club appearance, in the Bronx, with musicians Bill White and Chester Smart. He had also by this time begun to perfect the use of the rhythm bones and the hand jive in his act and was soon working recording sessions with Sticks McGhee and Sonny Terry and other artists on Folkways Records. Other sessions followed for Prestige/Bluesville, and he did some touring with Sonny and Brownie.

In 1959 a stormy marriage forced Burris to leave New York City and he headed for the West Coast. Short on

funds, he caught a freight train out of Delaware which took him to New Mexico, where he worked as a farm laborer long enough to buy himself a bus ticket into Los Angeles. He found jobs scarce in L.A. and for a while passed out handbills for five dollars a day. Soon he was back to playing in the streets again, but the police took this rather unkindly and he was arrested. It was not long after that he heard that Sonny and Brownie were in San Francisco and Burris hitched a ride up the coast, arriving in time to hear the pair perform at Sugar Hill, a then-popular North Beach spot on Broadway run by Barbara Dane. Through Terry's recommendation Burris was hired, playing intermissions there alongside such acts as Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, and K. C. Douglas.

In San Francisco Burris made North Beach his home. He became a regular at Coffee and Confusion, augmenting his income unloading rice trucks in

Chinatown and banana boats at the Embarcadero. He regularly auditioned at the Jazz Workshop and the Hungry I, but without much success. He did, however, manage regular engagements at the Spaghetti Factory and a number of other places including the Blue Mirror in the Fillmore. When the Matrix opened he was a regular there too for some time, while also appearing frequently at the Cabal and Mandrake's in Berkeley. However, he was working as a street musician as much as anything else and the years of hard living were beginning to take their toll. In 1966 Burris suffered a severe stroke that left him without the use of his right side. He was bedridden for three years and spent another four in therapy. It was through acupuncture that he finally regained the use of his right side again, and in 1973 he began gradually performing again, unsure whether any future lay ahead for him in music.

The long years of illness made him a more determined and introspective performer. Things did begin to look promising. A radio appearance resulted in a booking at the Berkeley Blues Festival. Engagements followed at the Boarding House and the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco and climaxed in a performance at the 1975 San Francisco Blues Festival. He had meanwhile come to the attention of Chris Strachwitz, who was quite taken by Burris' down-home style and song writing ability, and an album was planned. A recording session, however, failed to capture the spontaneity of his live performances; consequently this album is the result of performances at the Northeast Community Center in San Francisco, and the West Dakota in Berkeley.

The songs are all personal statements. Burris is forever writing songs about the things that have touched his life. He is, one might say,

tormented by the blues, but there is optimism in these songs, too, and never a trace of bitterness, only a trace of hurt from love, society, fate. "The blues is hardship," says J.C., "the blues is not singing about the stars and the moon like those classic songs. Blues is a feelin', and if you can't feel it, you can't sing it."

During the filming of **Leadbelly**, directed by Gordon Parks, Burris was flown down to Hollywood for several days of shooting for an appearance in one scene in the movie. He is also featured as one of the performers of **Riverboat 1988** (produced in 1976), a hilarious vaudeville spoof filmed in San Francisco. His other credits include "The San Francisco Blues" for educational television. This is J. C. Burris' first album.

— Tom Mazzolini

(notes to the original Arhoolie LP 1075,
San Francisco, November 1975)