

At home with SLeePY JOHN ESTES

by Jerry DeMuth

The tar-papered roof is almost obscured by tree branches and the white paint on the small frame home is peeling. A rock serves as a step up to the sagging porch that runs the length of the house.

Like other houses in the area, Estes' is set on a hill, with a ridge in the steep, grassless bank serving as a pathway from the road. Inside is a large old steel-framed double bed with a stained bare mattress, a dresser, a stand, a straight-backed chair and a couch. A bulbless lightsocket hangs by a long cord from the ceiling, and little light from the bright sun outside penetrates into the gloomy interior. The bare wooden walls are dark from age and stained from years of soot. Only tiny patches of wallpaper show that someone—fruitlessly, perhaps—had tried to make something more of what had once been a sharecropper's or day laborer's shack.

Estes appeared, led by his wife through a back room cluttered with tubs, tools, old clothes, and other odds and ends. Tapping his cane on the bare floor boards, he moved slowly. Dark glasses shielded his eyes. Estes, now 66, was a child when he lost the sight in one eye. In 1950, the other eye gave out.

This thin, bony man—clad in a stained white shirt and baggy blue-gray pants held up by old-fashioned wide suspenders—was one of the world's greatest blues musicians, composer of perhaps more than 500 songs, including such classics as *Drop Down Mama* and *Someday Baby*.

He sat down slowly and carefully on the couch, flies crawling unbothered on an open sore on his left ankle. He spoke slowly and softly, like a defeated man. Only when he shouted at his children did his voice reveal the power and roughness that characterizes his singing. He spoke freely of his youth and of how he came to play and sing the blues.

"I started singing when I was about 12

years old and I started at house parties when I was 14.

"A boy around here used to play guitar, and to get to see his girl friend, he'd walk a mile or two across the fields. He'd come through our yard every evening and I heard him playing songs and would follow him across the fields to hear the sounds.

"He and his friends would go from house to house playing music. When they came by our house we'd get out on the porch. We'd start making a racket to sound like them—woke up my mother and everything.

"Then I went and made me a cigar box with one string on it and started playing it. The string came from a broom. You know, on a broom you had wire wrapped around to hold it.

"My mother told my father, said 'That boy going to be a musician, 'might as well buy him a guitar.' He said, 'Wait till fall and I'll buy you one.' So he worked and bought me that guitar."

Estes' father was a sharecropper. "We made 40 and 50 bales of cotton a year," Estes explained.

At that time, the family lived in Jones, Tenn., about 10 miles northeast of Brownsville. When Estes was about 11, the family moved to a farm outside Brownsville.

"My fingers wasn't long enough for me to handle the guitar," he admitted, referring to the instrument he got from his father. "So I'd just play one string at a time. I'd go from house to house playing but I didn't know how to tune it. When it runned down I'd take it to those boys to tune it.

"When I was first born," he said, smiling, "a man from Texas told my mother to put a dollar in my left hand and a guitar in my right; told my mother I was going to be a musician; said it was talent.

"I sang songs I heard others sing for a while," he admitted. "I listened to

records. Willie Newman, he was fancy a guitar player I listened to. But I always liked my own songs."

Brownsville is only about 50 miles northeast of Memphis and young Estes began spending much of his time in that city, playing on street corners, at house parties and even—briefly, because he couldn't get a sponsor—on a radio program.

"When I got good enough," Estes explained, "I went to Memphis and started recording. A fellow came from Victor in New York. He said, 'John, I like that voice. I want to record you.'"

This was in 1929, when Estes was playing on Memphis street corners with mandolinist Yank Rachell, who is from Estes' home county of Haywood.

"I was singing along Beale Street, around 33rd Street and Beale," Estes said. "I'd pass the hat around, or a jug. Sometimes I'd get a jug full.

"People would sit around out in their yards and they'd hear me playing on the street corner and they'd ask me to come play for a house party."

Besides recording in Memphis, Estes also went to Chicago in the mid-1930s to record for Decca and remained with that company for six years.

"*Some Day Baby*," he said. "I first wrote that for Decca.

"I played with a jug band. I was playing with Yank Rachell. Hammie Nixon (the harmonica player who also came from around Brownsville) started out with me in the '30s.

"We'd carry an extra jug. When the jug was full we'd sit down and divide it. Sometime so much money would drop in there it would sound like rain on a tub."

Estes laughed. It was a quiet chuckle, but his dark, somber face wrinkled and glowed.

"At every house party," he continued, "it seemed like I'd get more crowd than anybody. If two-three of them had a house party at the same time, it seemed like the man who had me would get all the crowd. Sometimes there would be so many people in the place it would break the floor down."

Estes laughed again, shaking his head.

"They was bootleggin' at these places," Estes recalled. This was during prohibition. "We played there Friday through Sunday, every weekend. I even played for policemen. We'd get raided but they would never take me in. They'd arrest everyone else. One time they said, 'Who was that playin' guitar?' I told them it was me. They said, 'You just keep on; I want some more of that.' 'I was at several of them like that.'"

"I was at one way back in the country. A cop came out there. He raided everyone. We was getting ready to go. He

Continued on page 29



JERRY DEMUTH

ESTES

continued from page 10

said, 'You just stay back down there and play the same tune you were playing when I came here.' I never did go in with him."

In those days Memphis was home for many blues musicians from rural communities in the surrounding area.

"Howlin' Wolf used to play down the street from me," Estes said. "There was Sonny Boy (Williamson)—Rice Miller. He's dead now. And John Lee Hooker. Is he dead?"

Estes was told no.

"I started B. B. (King) out," he added. "He used to bring me and Yank something cold to drink in Memphis."

Estes also played a lot around Brownsville—at house parties and picnics or just at his home.

"I'd sit on the porch playing," he explained, his voice rising. "I'd sit down there and I'd throw my hat down. My wife would say, 'Pick up your hat there, the wind'll blow it away.' I said there's enough money to hold it down."

Estes laughed.

It was this exhausting life of playing in Memphis and Brownsville as well as helping his father sharecrop that resulted in his getting the nickname Sleepy, Estes said.

"Every night I was going somewhere," he related. "I'd work all day, play all night and get back home about sunrise. My daddy and mother would take a 4 o'clock breakfast. Sometime I'd take a sandwich in my hand, get the mule and get right on going. I went to sleep once in the shed. And one time my father sent me out one day. He said, lay by the corn. I went out and layed by it and went right to sleep. Slept till the afternoon."

He laughed again.

"I used to go to sleep so much when we were playing, they called me Sleepy. But I never missed a note."

Estes interrupted the story. "I want to sing Kennedy for you. Did you ever hear that one?"

He called to his wife: "Get me my guitar. Is it there on the wall?"

An old acoustic guitar hung on the wall above the bed but it wasn't what Estes wanted. A quick search located an amplified guitar in a case with its own speaker and amplification system. The case was opened on the floor in front of Estes and the guitar handed to him. The cord plugged into the empty socket that dangled from the ceiling.

Estes slowly tuned the guitar, adjusted the volume and other controls, and began to sing. Now his voice rose—deep, rich and strong—filling the small house and bringing his children inside to listen.

Estes sang of his reaction to the assassination of John F. Kennedy and then, finished with that blues, quickly began again.

"Drop down mama, let your daddy see ...," he began his most famous blues.

Several songs later he laid the guitar down across his lap.

"In 1968, I was playing at a coffee house in Memphis," he commented. "A singer gave this set to me. They said I played the best blues they'd ever heard."

"An amplifier is all right if you don't play them too loud. Otherwise they drown out the voice. Some play them so loud you can't understand them."

In 1962, after Estes was rediscovered, he went on his first tour, lugging an amplifier with him.

"I had never played with an amplifier before," he said, "I figured it would be nice. I didn't play so hard then."

Still he did not use the amplifier at all at any of his concerts.

"In '62 a fellow by the name of Odel Sanders brought a man, a David Blumenthal down. He said, 'I'm glad to see you're still alive.' He said he wouldn't get out of town till he found Sleepy John. He stayed here about three or four days in a hotel till Odel brought him down."

At the time it had been assumed in blues circles that Estes, whose age had been estimated at 90, was dead. Then Big Joe Williams revealed that Estes was still living around Brownsville. That information eventually led to his rediscovery, and in 1962—for the first time in 21 years—Estes was recording again. He has since played across the U.S. in folk music clubs and at folk and blues festivals, and has twice traveled to Europe.

"I last went to Europe in, let's see, it was '66," he reflected. "the first time I went was in '64. I was drinking at that time with Lightnin' Hopkins. I didn't even know when I got there."

But Estes seldom plays around Brownsville any more, except when he has visitors.

"I did play picnics and house parties," he said. "They'd put out a bowl of stew. I'd eat free and get paid. But I don't do much playing around here now."

Yet Estes is still well known around the town, by both whites and blacks. Older whites know him as a local musician who has played across the country and some younger whites even have his records. In the black community he is well known by older people—many of whom at one time lived near him and heard him sing nights—and also by younger blacks, who are separated from him by more than years.

It was a young black man who has been active in the civil rights movement in the area who helped this writer find Estes' home—that small, almost shack-like structure that contradicts the importance and genius of the man inside and even shocked my young guide.

"Y'all come back," said Estes as we drove off. Minutes later, we found ourselves on a tree-lined street with large white frame houses.

Hot Licks. From foxx.



FOXX introduces the **TONE MACHINE**, a switched-on tone device that produces the most exciting lead passages ever! The **TONE MACHINE** combines unique fuzz effects with the world's longest variable sustain. From a natural speaker distortion to a glass-shattering fuzz. This one's got it all. And more. Our exclusive **OCTIVE-SUSTAIN** effect, activated by a separate switch, will sustain any amplified note at **eight notes above** its original frequency. Your axe will never be the same!

Carries Lifetime Guarantee. Available in five plush colors: **RED, BLUE, BLACK, YELLOW, and BRITE LIME.** **Price: \$44.95**

See your local dealer or order direct!

foxx

RIDINGER ASSOCIATES, INC.
10754 Vanowen Street
North Hollywood, CA 91605

Send me ☐ **FOXX TONE MACHINES**

Color

☐ Check Enclosed (we pay shpg.)

☐ Send C. O. D.

☐ Charge BankAmericard #

☐ Charge Master Charge #

Cardholder's Name

Signature

Total Amount \$

Buy it and try it on for sound. If not completely satisfied, return within 10 days for prompt refund.

Name

Address

City State ZIP