

JOHN FAHEY



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1959–2001</i>	<i>American Primitivism</i>	<i>Sligo River Blues (1959)</i>

Only Solitaire

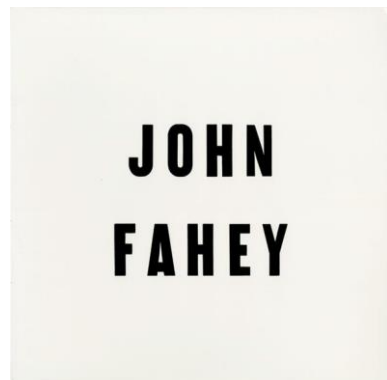
Artist: *John Fahey*

Years: *1959*

George Starostin's Reviews

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JOHN FAHEY / BLIND JOE DEATH

Album released:

1959

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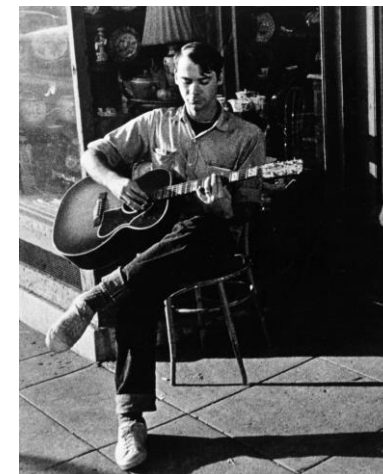
More info:



Tracks: 1) West Coast Blues; 2) St. Louis Blues; 3) I'm A Poor Boy A Long Ways From Home; 4) Uncloudy Day; 5) John Henry; 6) In Christ There Is No East Or West; 7) The Transcendental Waterfall; 8) Desperate Man Blues; 9) Sun Gonna Shine In My Back Door Some Day Blues; 10) Sligo River Blues; 11) On Doing An Evil Deed Blues.

REVIEW

Even if you get terminally bored with this record — and no one has the moral right to condemn you if it *does* bore you to death, as it did to me upon my first listen — heck, even if *everyone* gets terminally bored with it, from people who simply cannot stand solo acoustic guitar to people who praise these recordings just because they feel they're supposed to... even *then* its Library of Congress status of «culturally, historically, or aesthetically important» cannot be denied. Above everything else, it might simply be the very first known «indie» album, recorded and released decades before the very term entered public conscience. Not only did Fahey set up his own tiny label to make the LP look more presentable (Takoma Records did not even become a properly legal brand until 1963), but he also had to disseminate the original 100 copies completely by himself, through a small network of friends and nearby record store owners (I guess an original printing might be worth a small fortune by now, although price is usually the equivalent of rarity multiplied by popularity, and since John Fahey's name hardly carries the weight of a Bob Dylan or a John Lennon, we probably won't be able to feed the world by holding a Fahey-related auction).



Of course, John Fahey was probably far from the only guy in 1950s America trying to record and market something on his lonesome own; yet even so, his debut album seems to be the only «indie-style» record of any genuine renown to have been remembered and acknowledged from that era, which means that it *must* have certain outstanding qualities. Even if Fahey had not followed it up with a respectable career that took him through four decades of music-making and pretty much every musical tradition known to and instigated by man, I am sure that the album would still have somehow managed to linger on as a priceless curio, knowledge and possession of which would always distinguish the True Musical Elite from the Profane Philistine with his cheesy collection of Pete Seeger and Hot Tuna records.

So who really was John Fahey, the 20-year old fingerstyle guitarist from Washington D.C. who apparently loved blues and folk music so much that he utterly loathed and despised the entire burgeoning blues-and-folk community, keeping clear of Greenwich Village as if it were really a daughter branch of Caesars Palace, Las Vegas? Indeed, the biggest mistake one could make would be to lump Fahey in with the likes of the Twelve Apostles of Woody Guthrie, all the Dave Van Ronks, Phil Ochs, Odettas, Joan Baezes, and so on. Much closer to home would probably be comparisons with the later breed of «acoustic constructors» from the UK, such as Davey Graham and Bert Jansch — but even those would be somewhat off the mark, and possibly even detrimental for one's enjoyment or understanding of Fahey, since the «entertainment factor» in Graham's and Jansch's music is unquestionably higher.

Actually, the one analogy that my brain simply cannot get rid of comes from a different field altogether: to me, it sounds like John Fahey was trying to do for the entire field of traditional American music much the same thing that, around the same time, Glenn Gould was trying to do for classical music. Both of them were relative outsiders and evident eccentrics in their respective areas — both had clear mental issues, including OCD and stuff; neither was a great fan of live performing, preferring to achieve sonic perfection in the safe and comfortable confines of the studio. Most importantly, both had tremendously analytical minds, making their entire lives into grand missions to get to the bottom of that irksome issue — *what is it, exactly, that makes this music so great?* Not coincidentally, both Gould and Fahey wrote almost as much about the music they were playing as they actually played it (Fahey had a degree in philosophy and even wrote a master's thesis on Charley Patton at UCLA — take *that*, you illiterate Greenwich Village folkies!). They even looked a little bit alike, at least in terms of facial expressions. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Fahey traveled with his favorite «guitar stool» while touring (and it's actually a bit of a wonder that he did tour at all — but then again, this is one luxury he probably could never afford, unlike Gould, whose status as a commercial star of classical music made life so much easier).

Whenever I listen to something, for instance, like this long, repetitive, exquisitely executed rendition of '[St. Louis Blues](#)', I cannot help being reminded of Gould's approach to Bach — the same careful, gracefully-but-firmly applied staccato approach to each note, as if to sternly remind us of the individual value of each note and the perfection with which they are tied together into a single whole. These are, in a way, «educational» performances, like the ones you would expect to hear and see slowly performed on a YouTube video from some musical instructor; yet they are also perfectionist, reverential, transcendental, if you so wish, performances that blur the line between technique and spirituality. And just as there are people out there who hate, despise, or are completely indifferent to Gould's style of playing, so I can imagine similar people feeling and thinking that John Fahey got it all wrong, too — that you simply cannot approach this material from such an analytical perspective, that the right way to play this stuff is to do it like Lonnie Johnson does, or Elizabeth Cotten, or any other «authentic» African-American performer from the good old days.

And if I were twenty years younger today, I might have shared those feelings; in fact, I do still hate the general «reverential» approach to rootsy material — Appalachian folk, blues, country, bluegrass, you name it — and far prefer when it's played casually and naturally, without any unnecessary aggrandizing; give me Leadbelly, telling it like it is, over Pete Seeger or Joan Baez worshipping at the temple of Ye Olde Folke Tradition any day. But Fahey's is indeed a different story. He does not exactly «worship» at the altar of those old songs; instead, like a curious young boy with his mechanical toys, he pulls them apart, meticulously explores each little cog, then puts them back together — sometimes with the details in slightly changed order — and comes out with a clear understanding of the mechanics, while managing not to lose admiration for the «magic» despite now being in complete control of it. That picking style he uses on 'St. Louis Blues' — I do not know how to describe it musicologically, but it reeks of that mysterious smell that makes us talk of «completeness», as in, «the complete guitarist». Fast forward ten years, and I get the same whiff from Keith Richards' playing on 'Love In Vain' — a certain «wholeness» of embracing the acoustic guitar in a way in which it is almost never done by anybody else. (And while few people ever mention John Fahey and Keith Richards in the same sentence, this is also as good a place as any to note the atmospheric similarities between John's rendition of 'I'm A Poor Boy A Long Ways From Home' and Keith's picking on 'Prodigal Son' — I do not just mean that this is the same song, which it obviously is, but that both use similarly odd tunings and picking styles. Coincidence, or was Keith an actual hidden fan?).

The entire first side of the album consists of Fahey covering those old country blues from the 1920s, for which endeavor he had chosen himself the suitably apt alias of «Blind Joe Death» — a very, very telling one, because, of course, no authentic bluesman in the 1920s, healthy or insane, would have wanted or been able to call himself by that name and still get a

recording contract. Even somebody like Blind Willie Johnson, one of the chief influences on the young John Fahey, could be all scary and creepy and sing and moan about death, but he would never *call* himself Death — for one thing, that'd be way too pretentious, and for another, it would probably never have occurred to Blind Willie Johnson to identify himself as the Bringer of the Apocalypse, rather than the Messenger for Life Eternal. Some sources claim that Fahey did indeed manage to fool some of the distributors into believing the authenticity of an old blues guy called «Blind Joe Death», but if true, it only goes to show how little certain people care about their own culture (then again, some say there were also people who believed *One Million Years B.C.* was a documentary).

Yet for Fahey, the «Blind Joe Death» moniker is in perfect agreement with his musical philosophy — since «death» is a very vital, relevant, and ever-present concept in so many works by so many blues musicians, it produces about the same effect if an aspiring, ambitious, and «meta-oriented» filmmaker took on the penname of «Charles Foster Rosebud». It doesn't even matter that «death» as such is not particularly well represented in the music — there are, after all, no lyrics, and out of the six songs on Side A, only 'St. Louis Blues' sends out a relatively mournful message. It just goes to remind you that, well, death is an inevitable part of life. All them hard-working, tough-toiling bluesmen of the past, they may have reached out to life while singing about death — but now's the time to reach out to death while playing about life. Just for a change.

Speaking of hard-working bluesmen of the past: despite his early childhood impressions and later musicological studies, the album's single chief influence hardly seems to be the screechy slide guitar madness of Blind Willie Johnson, nor the choppy, raggedy, disturbed playing of Charley Patton. The closest analogy in terms of tone, volume, repetition, and overall mood are the 1928 recording sessions of Mississippi John Hurt — quite a singular achievement in pre-war blues indeed, a set of tracks that sounded pensive, meditative and secluded against the background of most of his competition, yet at the same time deeply kind, humane, and melancholically optimistic. (If you haven't heard '[Avalon Blues](#)' or any of the other 12 classic tracks from those sessions, there's a hole in your soul that needs to be plugged right now). Fahey borrows some of Hurt's playing techniques, signatures, tunings and repetitions, but significantly slows down the tempos — there's not a way in hell you should get even the slightest inclination of being «entertained» by his music, because the idea is not to use that sound for your own purposes, but let the sound use *you* instead.

Thus, the classic blues of '[John Henry](#)' ('[Spike Driver Blues](#)' in Hurt's old version of the tune), deprived of its lyrics, slightly slowed down, pinned to a much louder, unerring, unnerving bassline, and adding an extra counterpoint for extra depth and maybe even a bit of «transcendentality», remains similar to the original, yet becomes something completely different. Any of

the Greenwich Village folksingers who might think of adopting the song for their own needs would likely stress its social aspect — the legend of the Steel-Driving Man — but Fahey is not interested in that at all; his idea is that, at the core of this tune, lies a beautiful piece of abstract, divine spirituality, not too far removed from the likes of Bach or Hildegard of Bingen, perhaps, and *his* mission is to help bring out that beauty, resurrect it and dress it up in shiny white. Whether he succeeds or fails in that attempt, whether he is right or wrong about his purpose, is for you to decide — but trying to analyze it from any different point of view would, as far as I see it, completely miss the boat.

Fahey himself used the term «American primitive guitar» to describe what he was doing, which might seem misleading if you just follow the words, rather than the general theory and history of art — in reality, the essence of «primitivism», both in the visual arts and in music, is not to «be primitive», i.e. attempt to return to the starting basics of art-making as preserved in the folk or tribal traditions, but to be grounded in or influenced by those traditions while at the same time attempting to remove them from their more pragmatic, practical applications and develop «the Absolute» concealed within them. Like Gauguin's Tahiti paintings, which have more to do with Gauguin's own ideals of beauty than the daily lives or cares of Tahitians, Fahey's interpretations of the old blues tunes, criss-crossed with tiny melodic elements he'd learned from medieval church music or Indian classical, are supposed to elevate them to a state of Platonic beauty. If you think about it really hard from a sociological point of view, you might even begin to get offended — this is, in some way, appropriation of African-American legacy to appease the pretentious white man's sophisticated ideal — but if we manage to get the race thing out of it, then what Fahey is doing is essentially not too different from what J. S. Bach and other 18th century innovators were doing with the «applied» musical genres, particularly dance styles, of their age, recognizing the elements of musical and spiritual perfection therein and detaching them from their prosaic, pragmatic functions. The reasoning is clear enough: what's the point of trying to directly emulate the spirit of an old pre-war bluesman, like those silly kids down at the Village, when you can instead borrow the *essential* part of that spirit and amplify it under a musical microscope?

Which is where the «John Fahey» side of the affair comes in, essentially — the second side of the album, which does contain four completely original compositions by John, plus a couple of very different variations on two more traditional blues numbers. «Completely original», of course, does not mean that they all consist of completely original chord progressions; Fahey's basic building blocks remain more or less the same as on the first side, but this time he's using them to construct entire buildings from the bottom and upwards, rather than expand sturdy hovels into shiny palaces. Thus, 'The Transcendental Waterfall', a sprawling six-and-a-half minute «blues suite», goes through three different parts, starting out as a bass-heavy minimalist piece, possibly inspired by Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark Was The Night', then progressing to a «bridge»

section largely played on higher strings, and finally turning into an accelerated, playful — for once, almost danceable! — coda that Mississippi John Hurt himself might have appreciated. You can visualize the whole thing as a tedious track through the jungle, eventually opening up to the lovely view of a lush meadow or, indeed, a pretty rocky opening with a waterfall; *or* you could visualize it as the workings of a troubled mind in the process of trying to compose a melody, slowly and almost abstract-mindedly plowing through a monotonous set of chords before finally settling on the right pattern and the right mood. Nothing of the sort could ever be found on a pre-war blues record — and I doubt that any pre-war bluesman would dare insert the word ‘transcendental’ into a song title even if he knew its meaning — but nothing of the sort would be possible, either, without the inspiration from all those pre-war blues records.

And what about those ‘Desperate Man Blues’ (a.k.a. ‘John Hardy’)? I would dare say that the song displays a certain sense of humor — a difficult statement to defend in light of the overall ultra-seriousness of the record, but it *is* somewhat amusing to hear Fahey’s Hurt-influenced picking pattern, soothingly-but-monotonously trickling through your speakers for a minute and three quarters, suddenly get interrupted by a dissonant bent note that gives the song an out-of-nowhere sitar-like Indian flavor, only to be followed several seconds later (at about 2:05 on [this recording](#)) by an even more out-of-place descending progression that seems like it’s been borrowed from Carl Perkins’ opening to ‘Honey Don’t’ — either this means that Fahey was *not* completely indifferent to the rock’n’roll scene (at least he could borrow from it for a laugh), or that both took the same phrase from an independent third source that I’m unaware of. In any case, both of these additions are funny but also reasonably natural fits, adding Zen-like «whack-you-with-a-stick» enlightenment moments to the meditative monotonousness of the main melody.

Arguably the most significant and symbolic of all the tracks on Side B, however, is ‘Sligo River Blues’. This is just a matter of a small crook in Maryland inspiring Fahey to create three minutes of impressionist perfection — let musicologists explain to you about all the intricacies of the melody’s gradual, super-subtle development and all the peculiarities of Fahey’s approach to syncopation; I’ll just say that this is a near-perfect musical visualization of a slow-to-swift river current and, if you ever so wish, the circle of life itself. It may seem like an almost totally static piece to you, and at the same time it’s as dynamic and hustling and bustling and full of life as possible — precisely like the river current. Musically, it also seems to lead us away from Mississippi John Hurt and more into the direction of classic bluegrass, and I could totally see somebody like Lindsey Buckingham going for the same picking style (actually, I do believe ‘Never Going Back Again’ showcases some similar picking patterns). But again, it definitely feels more «transcendental» than your average bluegrass instrumental.

If it seems like I've been gushing a bit too much about the record, let me adjust myself by saying that **John Fahey / Blind Joe Death** is not a record, and John Fahey is not an artist, to whom I could see myself listening on an everyday basis. In all honesty, I am not *that* sure that this kind of music is precisely the one in which one could or should quasi-religiously baptize oneself; I admire the effort to reveal the deeply hidden intricate spirituality and transcendental objective beauty of 'John Henry', but probably still wouldn't try to place it on the same pedestal with the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. On the other side of the matter, it is funny how most musical critics tend to rave and rant about John Fahey's greatness while at the same time, for instance, putting down and ridiculing the musical giants of progressive rock — even if, all things considered, what Fahey is doing here to classic «Americana» is not substantially different from what Yes, ELP, or Genesis would a decade later be doing to classic rock and roll. (Even Robert Christgau gave several of Fahey's albums A's, as though blissfully unaware of the artist's pretentious designs).

However, I do admire people with singular minds and daring purposes, and if I had to make a desert-island choice between, say, this album and Elizabeth Cotten's **Folksongs And Instrumentals With Guitar** — arguably the most celebrated of all the «authentic» acoustic instrumental albums from the 1950s — I'd probably end up with Fahey, preferring this «pretentious search for objective beauty» to plain and humble «authenticity». If only for the reason that I gave both records three or four listens before beginning to write, and while my reaction to Cotten was always the same, Fahey took me on a journey of perception: starting off with bored indifference, continuing with theoretical interest and respect, and finally settling down in a cozy little groove, or should I say, cozy little *grove* in Paradise where they put these tracks on endless repeat as the local elevator muzak. Neither me, nor you, nor anybody else in the world are obliged to love or even like it; but not seeing or hearing what is so *different* about it would just be plain wrong.

