

# JOHN LEE HOOKER

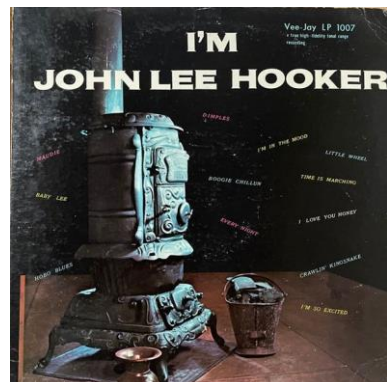


<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1948-2001</i>	<i>Electric blues</i>	<i><a href="#">Hobo Blues</a> (1959)</i>

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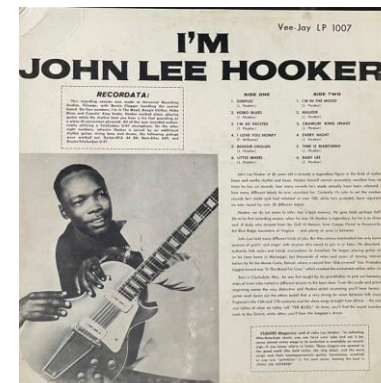
# I'M JOHN LEE HOOKER

Compilation released:

August, 1959

V A L U E  
1 4 3 3 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) **Dimples**; 2) Hobo Blues; 3) I'm So Excited; 4) I Love You Honey; 5) Boogie Chillun; 6) Little Wheel; 7) I'm In The Mood; 8) Maudie; 9) Crawlin' King Snake; 10) Everynight; 11) Time Is Marching; 12) Baby Lee.

## REVIEW

Any proper account of John Lee Hooker's recording career has to start with his earliest run of singles for the Modern label, beginning with 1948's classic 'Boogie Chillen' and onward — much like the early «raw» recordings of Elvis for Sun Records, these are the songs that, according to purist enthusiasts, most directly and forcefully give you the Beast, driven by pure demonic feeling rather than any superstar ambitions or record contract obligations. However, *that* part of John Lee Hooker's career is an entirely different story — from a certain point of view, his Modern period falls completely outside the Age of Rock'n'Roll, being more in line with the pre-war blues aesthetics, even despite Hooker's predilection for the trendy modern electric guitar from the very start. Those early singles, precious as they are, are not the records that would be carried over to Europe and would influence the excited ears of British teenagers such as Eric Burdon and Keith Relf, helping them to usher in the classic era of British rhythm & blues. Heck, they didn't even properly know how to mold them into LPs those days!



Consequently, while no blues lover's collection will ever be representative without a serious compilation from Hooker's early days on Modern (**The Legendary Modern Recordings 1948–1954** will probably suffice), we shall begin our journey through his long (and fairly uneven) recording career with the opening of the LP era; for Hooker, this happened in

August 1959, with his current Chicago label of Vee-Jay Records putting out a selection of A- and B-sides stretching all the way back to 1955 as **I'm John Lee Hooker**, his very first LP — as the title does indeed suggest.

Hooker's association with Vee-Jay was far from accidental. In the second half of the 1950s, when it came to blues, Vee-Jay sort of established themselves in Chicago as the «rebelliously unsophisticated», «proto-punk-blues» alternative to the more «cultured» environment of the Chess label — this was hardly intentional, but birds of a feather do tend to flock together, and Hooker eventually ended up on the label in 1955 through his connection with Jimmy Reed, who had already been cutting singles for Vee-Jay since 1953. In fact, Jimmy himself accompanies Hooker on harmonica on his earliest singles for the label (one of those B-sides, 'Time Is Marching', is included on the LP), and it is no coincidence, either, that Jimmy's own debut LP on the label, released one year earlier than Hooker's, bears the title of **I'm Jimmy Reed**.

In stark contrast to much, if not most, of his Modern era output, when it was usually just Hooker and his guitar, in Chicago, following Jimmy's example, the artist quickly got provided with his own house band — which usually included Reed's friend and companion Eddie Taylor on second guitar, as well as a rotating set of drum and bass players and, occasionally, a bit of piano backup. He did not abandon his classic solo style completely, but for the most part, he confined it to re-recordings of his best known oldies, which he began producing around 1958–59: this album, in particular, includes new versions of 'Boogie Chillen', 'Hobo Blues', 'Crawlin' King Snake', and 'I'm In The Mood' — all of these had been originally issued on Modern in 1948–1951, yet instead of properly «modernizing» them with a backing band, Hooker remade them in his traditional style. I am not exactly sure why; perhaps the people at Vee-Jay asked for this themselves, afraid that other labels might make more money on their former star's back catalog than Vee-Jay would make with his new stuff.

Once again, purists will probably insist that these re-recordings are nowhere near as «authentic» as the originals, but from an unbiased position this is debatable. Obviously, the sound quality for a 1958 recording would be objectively superior to a 1948 one. Also, over those ten years Hooker's voice — arguably the number one source for his legend, with his guitar playing skills strictly stuck at number two — had gotten at least an octave deeper and even more intimidating than it was in the late Forties, which works wonders for his inherently dark blues material. On the other hand, there is certainly a chillin' crudeness about the early recordings that makes them feel more earthy and Neanderthal than the slightly more melodic, more overtone-relying sound of the Vee-Jay era. All I can say is that it's fun comparing the two, and no fun debating which ones are more «authentic» and which ones more «commercial». One other thing that I have noticed is that the new versions are typically just a tad faster — this might be just a technical effect of the mastering process, but could just as well

be a side effect of John Lee Hooker going more «rock'n'roll» as a result of his constant playing with a band.

In any case, while the re-recordings all seem quite decent to me and fully deserving of being part of the Hook's legend, they still reflect a chunk of his older, pre-Chicago life. His *new* life truly begins with the lead-in track on this album, simply called 'Dimples'. Who didn't know 'Dimples' in the early Sixties? Everybody knew 'Dimples'. The Animals did a great version of 'Dimples' that, in my opinion, was in many ways superior to the original — but inevitably lost some of its rowdy caveman spirit. "*You got dimples in your jaw – you my babe, I got my eyes on you*". With this song, Hooker showed that he was not above crossing over to the pop market — without sacrificing an ounce of his bluesy authenticity. For all of Jimmy Reed's appeal to the unsophisticated, pop-loving crowds, *this* is faster, catchier, and farther removed from the stereotypical 12-bar blues formula than pretty much anything Reed did at the time. If not for Hooker's scary, growling, stalker-ish voice, this could have been real big with the kids — as it is, the recording was probably creeping out most of the conventionally-minded teenagers, not to mention the parents, back in 1956. (Come to think about it, with current attitudes it would have probably been creeping out most of the young people in 2022 just as well).

Transitioning to the 'Dimples' style wholesale would be too much even for Hooker at the time, though; most of the other recordings that Vee-Jay selected from his 12 or so singles recorded between 1956 and 1959 are more conventional and Jimmy Reed-ish, though on the whole, Hooker favored faster tempos than Jimmy. A typical example is 'I Love You Honey', which was a minor R&B chart success for Hooker in 1958: strong, prominent boogie bass — free-flowing, old-school piano accompaniment from Joe Hunter — and a nagging, insistent vocal that sounds a bit like Reed (but on fewer drugs and with more teeth in his mouth, metaphorically speaking). It's a pleasant track, but it has neither the voodoo magic of Hooker's solo recordings, nor the dark pop enchantment of 'Dimples'.

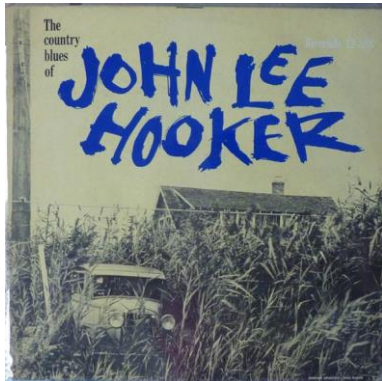
Much improved is something like 'Maudie', recorded about a year later, which departs from the same territory as 'I Love You Honey', but features a much stronger Hooker presence — here, Hooker's 'Boogie Chillen'-derived rhythm guitar, sounding like a knife rhythmically sharpened on stone steps, is far more prominent, and his voice is far deeper and more threatening (that "*Maudie, why did you hurt me, I love you baby, you been gone so long*" bit should have sent any real life Maudie running to the nearest police department). Melodically, there is absolutely nothing here in 1959 that hadn't already been done two hundred times earlier, but it does a good job of polishing the Hooker formula to a shinier state than ever before — that guitar-voice combo, with just a tiny bit of echo and a solid metronomic rhythm section putting some meat on the bones, could not be beaten even by such Chess competition as Muddy Waters.

Most of the other songs (including bonus tracks from the same era that can be found on some CD editions) predictably recycle the same formula; the rhythmic peculiarities and poppy geometry of 'Dimples' are more of a lucky exception in this case than a standard example of Hooker's creativity. But if we refrain from worrying about the monotonousness and prefer to instead concentrate on the impact of the general sound, Hooker's uniqueness quickly comes through even after he has been placed in the same general musical context of the 1950s' Chicago blues band sound.

What I mean is, where Muddy entices us with his swagger and cockiness, while Howlin' Wolf comes across as a theatrically malevolent demonic presence from the red-hot depths of Hell itself, John Lee Hooker plays the role of that grim, moody, silent, mysterious loner in the corner, mumbling out something frightening, if barely comprehensible. His is less of an "I'm gonna come out and get you!" or an "I'm gonna rule the world with my evil powers!" vibe than a "Don't mess with me, leave me alone to brood" vibe. Stuff like 'Dimples', in a way, is the spiritual predecessor to Ian Anderson's "sitting on a park bench, eyeing little girls with bad intent" theme — if there is one old bluesman I could easily identify with Tull's Aqualung, it would be John Lee Hooker. Sure enough, it might be a *much* creepier vibe than Muddy's or Wolf's, but if the blues ain't about being creepy, then what the hell is it about in the first place? If you want to keep your mind all clean and sanitized, just stay away from these dudes altogether.







## THE COUNTRY BLUES OF JOHN LEE HOOKER

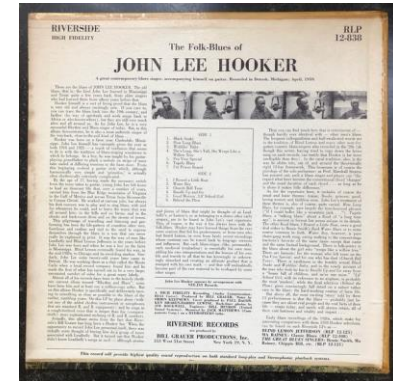
Album released:

V A L U E

November 1959

2 4 3 4 4

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Black Snake; 2) How Long Blues; 3) Wobblin' Baby; 4) She's Long, She's Tall, She Weeps Like A Willow Tree; 5) Pea Vine Special; 6) **Tupelo Blues**; 7) I'm Prison Bound; 8) I Rowed A Little Boat; 9) Water Boy; 10) **Church Bell Tone**; 11) Bundle Up And Go; 12) Good Mornin', Lil' School Girl; 13) Behind The Plow.

### REVIEW

It is no secret that John Lee Hooker is first and foremost associated with the electric rather than acoustic guitar — while he may have, on occasion, used the acoustic in the studio over the first decade of his recording career, most of those classic old hits we know, as well as the innumerable variations on said classic hits, were played on good old Gibsons and Les Pauls and the like. He himself was always saying that he preferred the electric sound — that all that electricity running through his fingers really made him feel empowered, or something of that sort. Throw in his «minimalistic» way of playing, not even remotely approaching the acoustic virtuosity of a Lonnie Johnson or a Big Bill Broonzy, and it won't be difficult to understand why his acoustic recordings tend to be overlooked in favor of that awesome headbanging riffing on the 'Boogie Chillun' groove — it's, I dunno, as natural as wanting to hear Eric Clapton play the piano or something like that. You can take a peek at that sort of entertainment out of sheer curiosity, but why waste time on stuff that does not come naturally to an artist?



Curiously, though, when Hooker signed up with the Riverside record label, the first thing they demanded from him was an acoustic-only set of recordings. The record label may be understood; Riverside, originally set up as a jazz label, was at the time riding the nostalgia kick and seeking out «authentic» Delta-style performers to provide them with enough ol'-timey performances to satisfy the growing demand for the folk-blues roots of American music. Meanwhile, Hooker, who had already had plenty of experience recording for multiple labels at the same time — usually under different pseudonyms — was *probably* interested in making extra cash in addition to his Vee-Jay career, and given that both his Vee-Jay album and his Riverside album from 1959 are in his own name, his contract with Vee-Jay must not have been exclusive, so at least he had nothing to fear when accepting Riverside's offer. But why did he accept it in the first place, when acoustic Delta blues was never really his «thang»? And, more importantly, is there any reason for *us* to even bother?..

My own answer to the second question is a definitive «yes»; I am not the biggest John Lee Hooker fan in the world, yet even I feel that overlooking his acoustic output would be as much of a mistake as, say, only worshipping Neil Young for his crunchy electric classics while totally ignoring his softer, country-folksy side. It's not as if John Lee Hooker with an acoustic guitar were a completely different person — on the contrary, he tends to play the acoustic much in the same way as he plays electric, but since nobody really plays the electric guitar quite the same way that Hooker plays it, this automatically means that nobody really plays the acoustic one quite like he does, either. The album title is spot on: this is, indeed, **The Country Blues Of John Lee Hooker**, and of nobody else. Perhaps Riverside did want an «authentic» experience from this guy, but we can safely say that, regardless of whatever actually counts as «authentic» for a style that used to be practiced by hundreds of practitioners with their individual twists and quirks, nobody ever played Delta blues in the 1920s or 1930s in precisely the same way John Lee Hooker played it in 1959.

There is a solid selection of covers of old songs by other artists on this record, from Leroy Carr to Charlie Patton and the original Sonny Boy Williamson, but the one tune that will probably ring some bells for most people is Hooker's own 'Tupelo Blues', his lyrical and musical reminiscence of the great Tupelo Flood that has since been covered by countless artists and even reimagined by some of them (e.g. as Nick Cave's 'Tupelo'). It is not the most typical representative from this record, because it is not so much an actual song as a spoken-word performance with a musical backup — Hooker keeps twirling and vibrating his way through a looped blues riff that sounds more like a potential introduction to a song than a self-sustaining melody. Amplify these sounds properly and you end up with something that a Robin Trower might play before launching into 'Bridge Of Sighs', or, actually, that Jimi might have played as a warm-up for 'Voodoo Chile' during the **Electric Ladyland** sessions. But *don't* amplify those sounds and what you get is a distant, ever-so-mildly creepy, ominous echo of



terrible devastation some time in the past, narrated by an old «quasi-survivor» as both a scary campfire tale for the kids and a subtle warning of possibly comparable troubles yet to come. This is not a John Lee Hooker invention — this sort of semi-chanted, semi-spoken rambling blues was practiced by quite a few Southern performers, e.g. Blind Willie McTell and others — but Hooker is among the first, if not *the* first such performer, to give the thing a properly cinematic feel, very intentionally going for an artistic effect where pre-war bluesmen would usually just tell it as it was. He might not be the greatest Sophocles reader in the world, but he *wants* us to believe that he is Blind Father Tiresias all the same, and I have no problem believing him when he keeps taunting me with his questions of "*wasn't that a mighty time, a mighty time that evening?*" because it sure as hell was.

Most of the performances here are somewhat tighter structured, yet somehow even they rarely feel like «songs». Hooker gives himself as much freedom as possible, both with his vocals and his guitar playing — which very rarely has any sort of smooth flow to it, it's more like a crudely constructed, ugly-fitted agglomeration of choppy licks, constantly changing tempo and time signature; again, this used to be a trademark of some pre-war performers as well, most notably Blind Lemon Jefferson (not coincidentally, Hooker begins the album with a BLJ cover), but it never sounded quite as sinister as on this album. Blind Lemon's '[Black Snake Moan](#)' was a semi-realistic morning grumble about not being able to get any — a sentiment quite close to the heart of many a listener; in Hooker's interpretation, '[Black Snake](#)' basically becomes a song about the Devil himself stealing the protagonist's woman from him, and you could probably guess it even without understanding a word from cryptic lines like "*he's a mean black snake sucking my rider's tongue*", just through the threatening plucking of the bottom string with the man's thumb and through the way he draws out and shakes up all of his resonant *m*'s and *r*'s at the end of each vocal line.

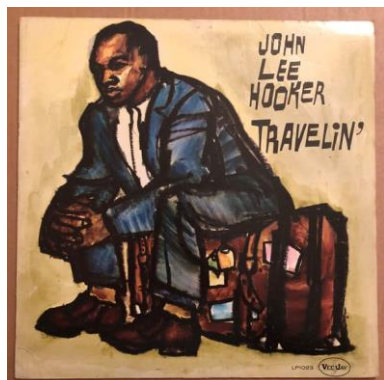
He even manages to insert a bit of a threat and a warning into 'How Long Blues', a song that is almost literally impossible to reimagine as anything but a whiny, broken-hearted, sentimental plead — that's the way it was originally performed by Leroy Carr and pretty much every black or white bluesman covering it ever since, but Hooker's choppy «time-marches-on» playing and the thoroughly unsentimental insistence in his wording of the "*how long, oh baby how long?*" chorus gives it a completely different interpretation. Not a very appropriate one for the song, perhaps, and I think this was actually one of the poorer choices, but it is still interesting to watch the man take something so remote from his usual style and give it the appropriate John Lee Hooker treatment.

Out of the «originals», the one obvious standout other than 'Tupelo Blues' is 'Church Bell Tone' which, under the right

conditions, can sound scarier than any Black Sabbath song out there — well, at least those opening church bell-imitating string pulls certainly sound scarier than the actual church bell that opens ‘Black Sabbath’ (the song); for what it’s worth, some of those wobbly trills you hear throughout this track *would* later become a standard part of Tony Iommi’s guitar lick arsenal. Just give a little push to your imagination, and those trills will naturally transform into rolls of thunder and lightning, accompanying the protagonist as he follows his loving baby’s hearse with its "two great white horses" to the burial ground. This is some pretty *sick* country blues if I know anything about anything...

Certainly not *all* the tunes on this record are about Death or the Devil — there are even occasional humorous turnarounds like ‘Bundle Up And Go’, an indecent variation on the ‘Step It Up And Go’ oldie — but since Hooker’s playing style and voice themselves do not vary all that much, most of the songs still end up meshing together, which is OK by me: forty minutes of such an atmosphere are quite tolerable, enjoyable and evocative. Contrary to popular belief, country blues of the Delta variety in pre-war times was never really all that «dark», not even when performed by the likes of Blind Willie Johnson or Charlie Patton; to make it conventionally «dark», one needed a modernist artistic touch, and John Lee Hooker was among the first guys to understand this and make it work — which is precisely why it was John Lee Hooker, and not Blind Willie or Charlie Patton, who would later serve as such a major inspiration for all the darkness-lovin’ modernist artistic white boys from Jim Morrison to Nick Cave. Which sort of makes **The Country Blues Of John Lee Hooker** one of those «seminal» albums, if my understanding of the term is really correct.





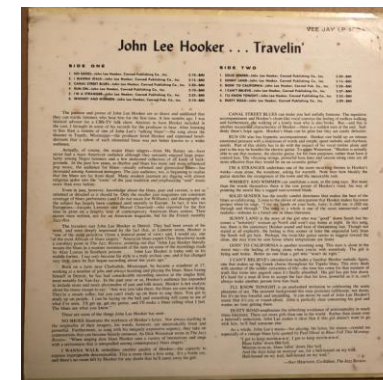
## TRAVELIN'

Album released:

1960

V A L U E  
1 4 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) No Shoes; 2) I Wanna Walk; 3) Canal Street Blues; 4) Run On; 5) I'm A Stranger; 6) Whiskey And Wimmen; 7) Solid Sender; 8) Sunny Land; 9) Goin' To California; 10) I Can't Believe; 11) I'll Know Tonight; 12) Dusty Road; 13\*) Nightmare; 14\*) Drive Me Away; 15\*) Love Me All The Time; 16\*) Bundle Up And Go.

### REVIEW

In contrast to Hooker's first LP for Vee-Jay, **Travelin'** was mostly recorded over a single session in early March 1960, with Hooker accompanied by Jimmy Turner on drums, Sylvester Hickman on bass, and Lefty Bates on second guitar (Lefty had only recently become a session man for Vee-Jay, also playing with Jimmy Reed on 'Baby What You Want Me To Do', among other things). As you can probably tell, this does not bode too well for the record's commercial potential — when John Lee Hooker gets in the mood, the mood tends to stay very much the same throughout his entire recording session, not to mention that he probably «composes» (or, more accurately, «re-creates») most of his new material on the spot. Sure enough, the album did not chart and yielded only one minor R&B hit single ('No Shoes') — but it is also clear that John Lee Hooker *was* very much in the mood while recording it, and it might be rewarding to try and attune oneself to the man's frequency to get the most of it.



Importantly, there is a conceptual side to the record: it is not called **Travelin'** for nothing — just look at all those song titles with the words 'walk', 'go', 'run', and 'road' in them, as well as references to all sorts of places from New Orleans to the state of California. Hooker is the kind of artist who is equally comfortable with a «sitting» / «tale-telling» mood, for which he

usually (but not always) reserves his acoustic guitar, and a «walking» / «strutting» / «racing» mood, which is usually (but not always) represented by his electric playing — as it is on this record. **Travelin'** finds him in a particularly dynamic state, and a good way to transcend its musical conservatism (most of these melodies, honestly, you have already heard in one way or another at least a few times each) is to imagine it as a coherent, «blues-operatic» travelog, telling you the story of a man who is chased from town to town by poverty, instability, and infidelity (his own or his partner's, doesn't really matter), but who also has the honesty to lay a large part of the responsibility on his own inner demons. In other words, this is the same old story of John Lee Hooker's lyrical hero's complicated relationship with the Devil, this time actually *presented* almost in the shape of an actual story, rather than randomly scraped together bits and pieces.

Once you settle into that perspective, it's almost surprising that 'No Shoes' could have made it as a self-standing entry in the R&B charts — its actual musical content is fully exhausted within the opening eight seconds as you get acquainted with its two-chord grumbling blues riff. Granted, not a lot of electric guitarists at the time could reach such a clear and expressive emotional effect with such utmostly minimal means, but still, the song works better as a thematic setting: "*No food on my table, no shoes to go on my feet / My children cry for mercy, Lord, they ain't got no place to call their own*" — which is, I guess, all the pretext one needs to just dump the children anyway and trudge off into the great American unknown. There is not an ounce of self-pity in the tune: all the emotions are purely animalistic. The riff growls and gnashes its teeth at you, and the vocals are that of a hunted animal prepared to defend itself, or at least to ensure itself some grounds for survival by getting the hell out of here, once and for all.

For that matter, the «great American unknown» is shown through the animal's teeth just as well. In the hands of the average New Orleanian performer, 'Canal Street Blues' would probably be a celebration, guaranteed to put a smile on your face or at least die trying. For John Lee Hooker, 'Canal Street Blues' is just another slow, bleeding trudge that leaves the protagonist impressed in only one respect: "*They tell me Canal Street is the longest street in town / You ride all day long, you're still on Canal Street*". There's nothing New Orleanian about the song — it's the look of a total outsider, furthermore, one who seems to measure everything in strict accordance with the quantity and quality of whiskey and women found therein. Judging by the relaxed, not-too-excited pace of the song, the protagonist would probably rate New Orleans about a 3 out of 10 on that particular scale.

Slowly, piece by piece, Hooker is drawing up here the most stereotypical, but quite true-to-life, portrait of the ramblin' man turned penniless urban slicker — one minute he is sucking up to the local ladies to put him up for the night ('I'm A

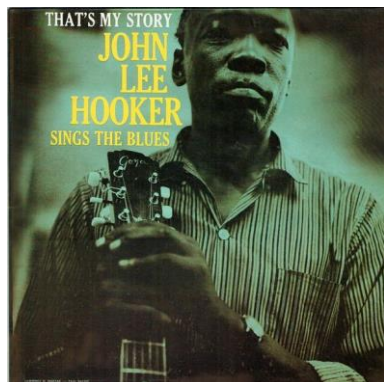
Stranger'), the other minute he is putting down his country bumpkin of a girlfriend for refusing to let go of her cornbread ways in the big city ('Sunny Land'). Eventually, we find him 'Goin' To California' while also sending his baby back home because there's no way he's taking somebody who "looks good", but "won't do right" back with him to the promised land... however, he still "ain't goin' down the big road by myself", as he declares at the end of the album ('Dusty Road'), and "if you don't wanna go, baby, I'm a-gonna take somebody else" because why the hell not?

Honestly, as I gaze intensely at these lyrics and try to follow these ragged rhythms, I keep getting the feeling that the entire album was conceived, «written» (figuratively speaking), and recorded in precisely those thirty minutes it takes to play it. I would indeed be glad if that were so, because any artist who can come up with an experience like this in no time flat is still a genius artist in my book. Yes, all the riffs (two or three of them) are recycled from past records — but the rhythm section very naturally adapts to them (particularly Hickman on bass, who understands very well what the «John Lee Hooker Growling Tone» is and always supplements it with his own). Yes, all the lyrics feel like they just floated through Hooker's mind without any prior considerations — this is why the sequencing of some of the lines and verses makes no sense — but hey, what a mind, right? And somehow they *still* manage to coalesce in this musical portrayal of a human being, driven by the simple biological propensity to live — I mean, very few artists make you remember that deep down inside, we're all just animals as efficiently as John Lee Hooker does. Nor is there any glorification of that fact: it's simply told the way it is, as food for your own further thought. You get born, you grow up, you eat, you have sex, you gamble, you lose everything, you travel from town to town, you play your guitar, you live on just because Mother Nature told you to. From the modern point of view, all that's missing is probably dying in a police choke hold — but John Lee Hooker was not a modern man, and he had nothing against spending about eighty years of his life in this mold.

If you want a memorable John Lee Hooker track from the Vee-Jay years, go for 'Dimples' or 'Boom Boom'. But if you're in the mood for a minimalistic, repetitive, «primitive» travelog that converts the most basic elements of life into art without a single flash of annoying pretense (that would be Bad Company, I'd say), **Travelin'** is a good potential choice — far from the only one in Hooker's extensive discography, but with the added benefit of catching the man in a small company of fine and understanding musical friends. His future bands would not always be on the exact same wave.







## THAT'S MY STORY

Album released:

1960

V A L U E

1 3 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) I Need Some Money; 2) Come On And See About Me; 3) I'm Wanderin'; 4) Democrat Man; 5) I Want To Talk About You; 6) Gonna Use My Rod; 7) Wednesday Evenin' Blues; 8) No More Doggin'; 9) One Of These Days; 10) I Believe I'll Go Back Home; 11) You're Leavin' Me, Baby; 12) That's My Story.

### REVIEW

There is no sense in pretending, I think, not to understand the *real* reason why Hooker had two record contracts going on at the same time in the early 1960s — and if you don't want to hear it from *my* lips, well, here it is quite succinctly stated in the opening track of the album, which is in itself a country blues arrangement of Berry Gordy's, Janie Bradford's, and Barrett Strong's classic 'Money (That's What I Want)'. Given that the latter had only just been released (August 1959) when John Lee Hooker went into the studio to record **That's My Story** (February 9, 1960), one has to note the man's surprisingly keen interest in the contemporary pop scene — 'Money' did not even have the time to become a smash hit for Motown before it was whisked away and reinterpreted by Hooker... without giving either Gordy or Bradford any credit, but I think he might have assumed that *they* just appropriated it from somebody else, anyway, just as it's always worked in the happy old pre-copyright days. Regardless, the song would make a hell of a lot more cash for Berry Gordy and Motown than it would for John Lee Hooker — even if JLH is definitely more believable than Barrett Strong when he sings about how *your lov'n' gimme such a thrill, but your lov'n' don' pay my bill*.





And this very fact is admirably ironic: I do not see much reason other than financial for Hooker to have been pumping out records for two labels at the same time with such impressive speed, yet it is also clear that, due to his uncompromising (the cynically minded would probably say «lazy») style, he could hardly have hoped to make *a lot* of money on either of those, and definitely not with his Riverside contract — at least the Vee-Jay sessions occasionally produced a hit single or two, whereas these acoustic recordings could only be of interest to a small bunch of folk blues enthusiasts. On the other hand, it is also true that the invested effort was minimal. **That's My Story** was cut on a single day, with Hooker accompanied by two side players from Riverside's pool of jazz musicians (Sam Jones on bass and Louis Hayes on drums) — and, just as it was with **Travelin'**, it feels very much as if he were «composing» this album right on the go, selecting rhythms and riffs from his trusty pocketbook and making up lyrics with no prior thoughts at all.

Again, singling out individual high- or lowlights is barely possible: the only proper «song» on the album is 'I Need Some Money', and even that one disintegrates into grumbly rambling after the first couple of verses, with Hooker much more interested in re-enacting a tense family squabble over finances than producing a pop hit. After that, all it takes is establish a mellow-but-ominous acoustic blues groove, lay back, and spew out some talkin' blues (only occasionally polished into singin' blues) on whatever topic springs out at any given moment. It's all very honest, life-like, minimalist, devoid of surprises, and, true to the album's title, having to do with John Lee Hooker's «life creed».

Even when we finally get to the title track, which comes last on the album, expecting, perhaps, to hear some interesting revelations about what it was that made John Lee Hooker into John Lee Hooker, all we get to know is that "*I was only 14 years old when I hit the road, I left Mississippi, I come to Memphis, Tennessee*", after which it was Cincinnati, and then Detroit, Michigan ("*I been there ever since*"). "*I had a hard time, now I'm doin' alright*". Come to think of it, what else would we be expecting to hear? That the night he was born, the moon turned a fire red? That his father was a gambler down in Georgia and he wound up on the wrong end of a gun? That he's a-runnin' down the road, tryin' to loosen his load? Forget all that pretty poetry bullshit, it's all self-mythologizing narcissistic crap anyway. Just let ol' John Lee Hooker tell it to you the way it *really* is. The day you end up with tears on your face by the end of the song instead of falling asleep in the middle of it is the symbolic day your *atman* finally connects with the *brahman*.

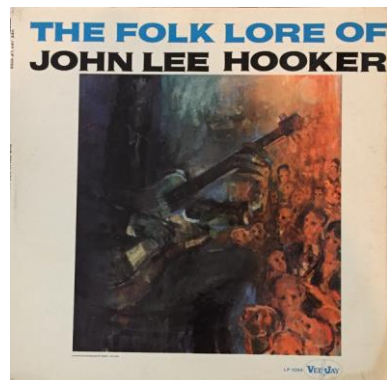
For me, that day is quite a long ways away, because, honestly, **That's My Story** tries my patience much more than **The Country Blues Of John Lee Hooker**, where songs like 'Tupelo Blues', with minimal effort, still managed to churn up a primal feeling of religious terror. **That's My Story** does no such thing; all of its songs are fully and completely centered on

the album's protagonist and the simple chores he has to go through on a daily basis in order to survive — such as, for instance, chase away a pesky guy rooting for his wife ('Gonna Use My Rod' — I originally thought this one was about the ancient art of wife-beatin', but turns out that JLH thankfully *inverts* the cliché and is planning to use his rod on the pervy seducer instead), or, in an interesting and rare foray into political matters, openly endorse the Democratic Party ('Democrat Man'), complaining about how "*Democrat put us on our feet*" but "*these crazy women, they vote them out*"; I presume he is talking about the significant preponderance of women's votes for Eisenhower that was noted in the 1950s. "*It won't be long 'fore the Democrats be back in again*", JLH goes on to promise, and his prediction would nicely come true by the end of the year (ironically, Kennedy would indeed be cumulatively voted in by more men than women, despite his dashing looks and all). But as nice as it is to learn about Hooker's party preferences, 'Democrat Man' is basically just a bunch of kitchen table talk set to familiar acoustic patterns of the thunder-on-the-mountain variety. Not something your local barroom blues band is going to be featuring in its casual setlist anytime soon.

On the other hand, 'Democrat Man' is at least a curious and unpredictable diversion from Hooker's usual stuff: most of the other songs on here either continue to detail his stalking efforts ('I Want To Talk About You'), or to lament about his broken family life ('You're Leavin' Me Baby'), or to even try and introduce that aspect of self-pitying which was so conspicuously missing from **Travelin'**: on 'I'm Wanderin', the longest track on the album, Hooker reinvents himself as a whiny dog, trudging after his former lady and yelping for one last chance. It doesn't work out too good — John Lee Hooker ain't a guy accustomed to saying "I'm sorry" — but it's kinda fun to see him try for a couple of minutes, before the slow and static groove really begins to try my patience.

Overall, if you are looking for a cohesive and atmospheric acoustic John Lee Hooker experience, **That's My Story** is hardly the perfect candidate; **The Country Blues** (as well as its later follow-up from the same sessions, **Burning Hell**) are a better way to get acquainted with the fire-and-brimstone side of the man. But as an approximation of a relatively sincere and truthful «musical diary», **That's My Story** seems adequate enough — the only problem is that sincere and truthful diaries rarely have space for genuine thrill and excitement.





# THE FOLK LORE OF JOHN LEE HOOKER

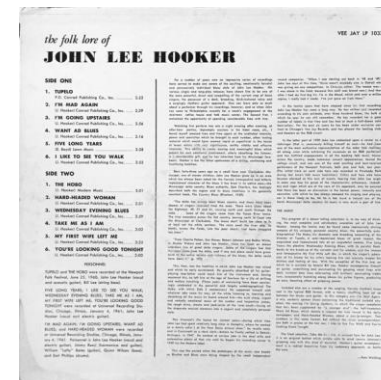
Album released:

August 1961

V A L U E

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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Tupelo; 2) *I'm Mad Again*; 3) I'm Going Upstairs; 4) Want Ad Blues; 5) Five Long Years; 6) I Like To See You Walk; 7) The Hobo; 8) Hard-Headed Woman; 9) Wednesday Evening Blues; 10) Take Me As I Am; 11) My First Wife Left Me; 12) You're Looking Good Tonight.

## REVIEW

By 1961, Hooker's contract with Riverside must have run out (at least, his only other record on the label would come out in 1965 and consist exclusively of archival takes), so Vee-Jay took the opportunity to try and capture both sides of the man — the country acoustic one and the urban electric one — at the same time, with the album title (**The Folk Lore Of J. L. H.**) transparently following the pattern of Riverside's **The Country Blues Of J. L. H.**, even if far from all the songs on the album could formally qualify as examples of «folk lore». Then again, Hooker himself never made a big point of separating those two sides, and, in fact, there are those times in the studio where it's hard to tell if the man is playing a meekly amplified acoustic guitar or a nearly unplugged electric one — or, for that matter, if his brainwaves are specifically following a «countryside» or a «big city» pattern. Not infrequently, they're just conflating both scenes in a single messy whole.

With just a little help from Vee-Jay Records, of course, as they introduce each of the album's sides with an acoustic track culled from Hooker's performance at the Newport Folk Festival the previous year. 'Tupelo' was, of course, a standout number on **The Country Blues Of John Lee Hooker**, and since it was performed very close to the original, the only big



difference is the overall sound — the well-isolated studio gave you the impression of a one-on-one dialog between Hooker and yourself, with the apocalyptic story transmitted directly inside your ear; the live recording gives a more «authentic» around-the-cave-fire feel, piling on an extra layer of gloomy darkness if you feel the atmosphere demands it (the only thing bringing you back to 20th century reality being a few faintly heard automobile beep-beeps in the distance). ‘The Hobo’, however, is a seriously slowed-down and «doomified» version of Vee-Jay’s own ‘Hobo Blues’, which used to be somewhat more upbeat and cocky, but now has turned back into a pensive rumination on the ugly hand of fate. (The reissued CD version adds ‘Maudie’ from the same performance, also transformed back into an acoustic number, although Hooker manages to mostly salvage the stern, martial bassline from the original electric recording).

No sooner than ‘Tupelo’ is over and done with, though, there is a quick shift to a decidedly more urban tone, as Hooker moves into the studio and, with the help of Quinn Wilson on bass and Earl Phillips on drums, launches into another of his famous tunes — at least, famous enough to later be also picked up by The Animals for their repertoire: ‘I’m Mad Again’, a three-minute perfect expression of pure, primal, steadily seeping rage. The pretext is that a certain unnamed friend cheated on the protagonist with his very own wife — a traditional motive for sure, but it could have been anything else, as long as it gives our guy the opportunity to deliver the mantra: *"I'm mad with you, like Al Capone!"* (Eric Burdon would later add Sonny Liston and Cassius Clay to the list of comparisons, but John Lee Hooker was probably not as much of a fan of the mighty black boxers as the young Geordie; besides, the famous Liston-Clay fight only took place in 1964, just in time to be referenced in the Animals version — as for the original song, well, I do guess that if you are based in Chicago, references to Al Capone are the most natural thing to jump off your lips at any time).

The really interesting thing about ‘I’m Mad Again’ is that it is based on more or less the same simple riff that propels the Muddy Waters / Bo Diddley ‘I’m A Man’ / ‘Mannish Boy’ series of swaggy call-outs; in fact, Hooker’s *"I'm mad, I'm mad"* is in itself a variation on Muddy and Bo’s *"I'm a man, I'm a man"*, and is thus an excellent symbolic representation of what’s different between those artists. Unlike them, Hooker has little need or desire for boastful self-aggrandizing; he is far more passionate about exploring the inner workings of man’s dangerous nature, which makes his output a much more natural object of psychoanalytical study than Muddy’s or Bo’s. When Bo Diddley threatens anybody in his songs, it is typically done in a light-hearted, jokey matter; when John Lee Hooker growls *"I might drown you, I might shoot you, I don't know... gonna tie your hands, gonna tie your feet, gag you so you can't talk to nobody..."*, that’s the Old Testament morality of retribution breathing down your back. To the best of our knowledge, Hooker never properly practiced what he preached (unlike Leadbelly, for instance); remember that it’s all theater, after all, but it’s damn believable theater, and *much* more

disturbing than the relatively safe, «commercial» by comparison vaudeville stagings of Hooker's competitors from the Chess artist pool.

The rest of the album, unfortunately, does not quite live up to the dark brutality of 'I'm Mad Again'. Most of the other songs are rather predictable and modest expansions on the well-known Hooker stylistics, all set to familiar minimalistic guitar grooves and previously explored lyrical imagery. 'I'm Goin' Upstairs' continues the «I'm going away, nobody needs me here» vibe of 'Hobo Blues'; 'Want Ad Blues' makes space for a little sexual self-advertising (again, *very* modestly stated next to the usual Chicago blues swagger); the title of 'I Like To See You Walk' is pretty much self-explanatory; and the cover of Eddie Boyd's 'Five Long Years' is a little misplaced, because it's a soulful song about self-pitying ("*if you've ever been mistreated, you know just what I'm talkin' about...*"), and that's not exactly Hooker's «native vibe», if you know just what I'm talkin' about. This one's more for the likes of B. B. King or Eric Clapton.

On the second side of the LP, we get treated to a piece of relatively fast boogie: 'Hard Headed Woman' has nothing to do with the Elvis classic under the same title, and its lyrics are far more routine than the Bible-stuffed verses of Claude Demetrius — though the basic sentiment (women just ain't no good) remains more or less the same. More interesting is the presence on the recording of both Jimmy Reed (who blows a bit of barely noticeable harmonica in the background) and his trusty sessionman, William "Lefty" Bates, who complements Hooker's choppy rhythm playing with stylistically similar choppy, stinky, torn-and-frayed electric lead licks; for about a minute and a half, with Lefty's aid the track turns into one of those wild and snappy guitar jams that would eventually become the bread and butter for the likes of ZZ Top.

Most of the time, however, the atmosphere is comparably more relaxed (though still suspenseful); soon after 'Hard Headed Woman', for instance, we get Hooker's amusing take on the «sentimental ballad» genre with 'Take Me As I Am', which I could only describe as «what would happen if, just for a brief moment out there, John Lee Hooker would suddenly want to be Sam Cooke». Honestly, I am not sure if the song was intended to be taken seriously or parodically — you can hardly ever tell with this kind of artist, of course, so perhaps both at the same time. (I often ask myself this question with all sorts of later artists, from J. J. Cale all the way up to Ween, but it's not that often that it comes up while talking about a song recorded back in 1961, mind you). Even the lyrics beg that question: "*If you can cook and be a good housewife / You don't have to wear lipstick and powder... / If you can cook, then it's all that I need*" — come on now, didn't we just hear from Muddy Waters not too long ago that "*I don't want you to bake my bread, I don't want you to make my bed*"? Surely this kind of «regressive» attitude cannot be anything other than sarcastic. Even the acoustic accompaniment, which sounds like

somebody desperately practicing to master some doo-wop chords and to be able to serenade one's sweetheart with wildly exaggerated «romantic licks», sends out hints that this stuff is not to be taken seriously. However, when you think to yourself of all the innumerable «lo-fi», rough 'n' crackly, covers or imitations of Tin Pan Alley ballads done by your average indie kid with an acoustic guitar in his bedroom at the turn of the millennium, do remember that there's nothing new under the sun and that the roots of this approach go all the way back to Mr. Hooker (at the very least).

In the end, like so many of John's albums, this one ends up relatively unsurprising, fairly monotonous, largely predictable, and yet thoroughly entertaining and thought-provoking at the same time. Perhaps Vee-Jay Records thought that, with the folk craze going around the country, its title would significantly raise sales among the regular customers of Greenwich Village and the Newport Festival – but while Hooker did go along with their promotional ideas (over which he probably had no control anyway), there is not a single sign here of his shifting his musical, lyrical, or spiritual priorities, and in the overall atmosphere of 1961, this kind of conservatism is actually quite admirable.

