

# SNOOKS EAGLIN



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1959-2002</i>	<i>Blues</i>	<i><u><a href="#">Look Down That Lonesome Road (1959)</a></u></i>

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*Only Solitaire*

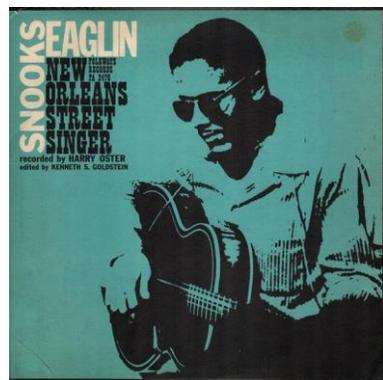
Artist: *Snooks Eaglin*

Years: *1959*

George Starostin's Reviews

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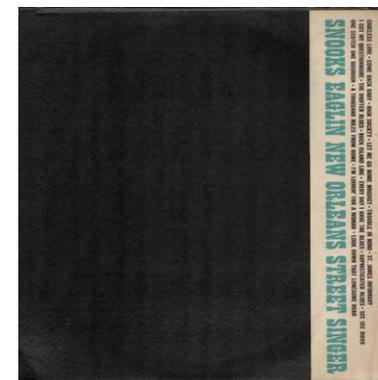
## NEW ORLEANS STREET SINGER

Album released:

1959

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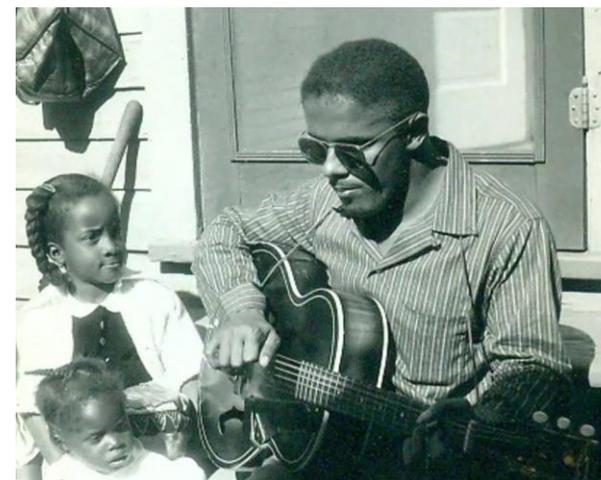
More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Careless Love; 2) Come Back, Baby; 3) High Society; 4) Let Me Go Home, Whiskey; 5) Trouble In Mind; 6) Saint James Infirmary; 7) I Got My Questionnaire; 8) The Drifting Blues; 9) Rock Island Line; 10) Every Day I Have The Blues; 11) Sophisticated Blues; 12) See See Rider; 13) One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer; 14) A Thousand Miles Away From Home; 15) I'm Looking For A Woman; 16) Look Down That Lonesome Road.

### REVIEW

As the story goes, some time in early 1958 a 35-year old folklorist by the name of Harry Oster, a well-distinguished graduate of both Harvard and Cornell Universities and, at the time, a professor at Louisiana State, went down to New Orleans for a tour of the local circuits (including the State Penitentiary) to hunt down some old-school musical talent. He certainly did not come away empty-handed (you can always count on the good old State Penitentiary!), but his *major* discovery was a young blind busker on the streets of the French Quarter, singing and playing his heart out to a repertoire of blues numbers. Sensing that here dwells that down-to-earth-authenticity he'd been looking for all this time, Dr. Oster whisked the busker away to the nearest recording studio, had him lay down a whole bunch of those songs, and triumphantly sold the results to Folkways Records under the proud title of **New Orleans Street Singer**. Who wouldn't want to buy an album with such a title? The only other one it could potentially lose to would be **Mississippi Cotton Farm Hollerer** — and even in that battle, it would still stand a chance, because, come to think of it, for most people New Orleans is more typically associated with jazz bands than street singers.



The irony of the situation is that, while Snooks Eaglin *did* really sing in the streets, on those occasions when he was unable to make money by any other means, he was by no means a bona fide «street singer». His preferred environment was clubs and bars, and throughout the early 1950s he actually played guitar in the Flamingoes, a local seven-piece band organized by none other than the mighty Allen Toussaint himself. He was fluent on both acoustic *and* electric guitars, and his special trick was playing the bass and lead lines at the same time, since, for some reason, the Flamingoes never bothered hiring a separate bass player — this experience certainly helped him out a lot with those street gigs, where he could confidently be a one-man orchestra, to the delight (hopefully) of the surrounding public.

This is not to imply that the entire affair was some sort of fraud or hoax. Fird "Snooks" Eaglin Jr. was a perfectly authentic self-taught singer and guitarist, with a perfectly authentic taste for all the musical material that was going through his head. Perhaps he wasn't really sleeping in the gutter, and perhaps his mother did not abandon him on the threshold of an orphanage when he was but ten days old, and perhaps rats and bats weren't his best friends to keep him company late at night, and, most importantly, *perhaps* he did not have the accumulated wisdom of sixty years of traveling on the road behind his back — all of which things sort of come to mind whenever you hear the phrase «street singer» — but listening to this album can certainly give you precisely this kind of vibe, and it comes across as perfectly natural: yes, that's just the way that Snooks played his guitar, and just the way he sang in his totally normal and natural voice.

For sure, he was far from the greatest player or singer of blues-based material in the 1950s, and his humble style, totally devoid of flashiness or any theatrical exaggerations, is unlikely to get quickly and firmly implanted in your memory — definitely not if you are already familiar with most of the giants of pre-war acoustic blues, or of Snooks' contemporaries killing it on their electric guitars somewhere up in Chicago. In his own way, he comes across here more like a spiritual predecessor to somebody like Jerry Garcia: friendly, likable, good-vibish, and amazingly eclectic in his choice of source material — a walking, talking, playing encyclopaedia of good old Americana. **New Orleans Street Singer** includes a whoppin' sixteen tracks, none of which stray too far from the blues idiom but almost each of which covers a different sub-part of that idiom. Some people would be happy to just sing "*woke up this morning...*" sixteen times in a row; not Snooks Eaglin, whose baggage includes the legacy of everybody from Leadbelly to Amos Milburn, from Muddy Waters to B. B. King, from Ray Charles to Bo Diddley. In his prime, the man was actually known as «The Human Jukebox», and although it is not quite true that he would play *anything* at all — he didn't do that much pop music or rock'n'roll, largely staying dedicated to the blues for all his life — it is quite true that within the blues idiom, the man simply could not be pigeonholed.

Snooks' talents as an acoustic player are perhaps most evident on the two short instrumental pieces included alongside his vocal numbers. One is '[High Society](#)', a lively ragtime variation on an old jazz dance number that goes back all the way to 1901 and used to be played by the likes of Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet; a close listen reveals some rather admirable skills in handling bass rhythm and lead lines at the same time, smoothly channeling the main melodic content of the tune from one part to another. The other is '[Sophisticated Blues](#)', on which Snooks makes a thirty-year leap forward and metamorphoses into an acoustic Elmore James — it's a little harder for him here to keep a steady rhythm going along with all the trills and arpeggios of his lead playing, but he still makes sure you'll be able to tap your feet throughout, and the degree of precision demonstrated here is impressive, well worthy of the best «technical» players of the era, like Big Bill Broonzy.

However, there is a good reason why the LP was, after all, called **Street Singer** rather than **Street Player**: as efficient as Eaglin is on the guitar, about 80% of his charisma lies in his voice, which many have compared to that of Ray Charles — certainly the one thing they have in common is the ability to sound about fifty years older than they actually were in the 1950s. Eaglin's own set of pipes does not go as deep or resonate as strongly as Ray's, meaning that he would never be able to have the mass public in such a strong grip as Ray; but instead, he offers a certain homely, porch-style variety of «humble soul» that may even be preferable for people who like their music totally free of any whiffs of «celebrity disease». Like the above-mentioned Jerry Garcia, or maybe even like J. J. Cale, to use an even more appropriate analogy, Snooks kept it fairly low, while still being able to come across as a wise, soulful, and likable person.

The downside of that singing style is that, when applied in similar ways to all of this diverse material, it will inevitably work better in some cases and less convincingly in others. For instance, his delivery of Amos Milburn's alcoholic anthems 'Let Me Go Home, Whisky' and 'One Scotch, One Bourbon' is far from perfect because it is almost impossible to associate the voice with that of a ravaged, worn-out drunk. But when the same voice is used to convey the sorrow and dread of 'St. James Infirmary', it results in one of the most soulful and emotionally chillin' versions of the song I've ever heard — and that is saying quite a lot, what with all the miriads of artists who had tried to put their own stamp on the tune. Likewise, 'Rock Island Line' is not a great song for Snooks' voice (it's a working song, after all, and Snooks never sounds authentic enough as a working man); 'A Thousand Miles From Home', essentially a lyrical variation on Jimmie Rodgers' old classic 'Waiting For A Train', is a *perfect* song for his voice, arguably able to produce even more pity and sympathy in the listener's soul than Jimmie himself — I'm fairly sure that "*nobody seems to want me / or lend me a helping hand*" bit should have been responsible for the lion's share of Snooks' street income.

The subtle changes made to Rodgers' lyrics, which make the song a little less of a travelogue and a little more of a cry for mercy, also remind me that Eaglin does quite a bit of tweaking to the old classics — it would probably take too much time for too subtle results to investigate this in detail, but at least one of the «remakes» is well worth mentioning, especially because it turns out to be an important missing link in the story of a song which I covered not so long ago for my [Great Moments On Video](#) series — 'Uncle Sam's Blues' by the Jefferson Airplane, traced back to the Hot Lips Page original from 1944 but not mentioning a more recent and obviously more close-to-home predecessor: '[I Got My Questionnaire](#)', which they most certainly heard on this Snooks Eaglin record and ended up reworking even further. Certainly *this* performance is where the line about "*40,000 men in service, doing something they can't understand*" came from — and I am assuming that Snooks is probably singing here about Korea, which brings the whole thing even closer to the anti-Vietnam vibe of the following decade. It is the only politically-minded performance on the record, but an important and, as we can see, quite an influential one.

Musically, he also has quite a few interesting ideas about reinventing standards, such as, for instance, his performance of the old chestnut 'Look Down That Lonesome Road' in an almost boogie fashion — which gives the entire album a surprisingly energetic and optimistic conclusion, yet still totally free of the gospel or, God forbid, Vegas pathos that some performers would add to the tune. On the whole, though, most of the musical differences of Snooks' versions simply come out naturally as a result of his self-taught playing style — he just does them the way it is comfortable for him to do them, which is unquestionably the best way to approach just about anything. It is this spirit of ease and total naturalness that really sells the album, more than anything else. In a way, **New Orleans Street Singer** is one of the least exciting records from the 1950s that I've ever heard — and in a way, this is precisely what makes it great, given how many artists at the time were giving it their all to sound as exciting as possible. By contrast, sometimes humility, peace, and coziness are the right way to go, and sometimes a quiet evening on the porch with Snooks Eaglin, the blind guitar prodigy of New Orleans, is exactly what you need after all the daily excitement of the loud and proud of this world.

