



## LITTLE BROTHER MONTGOMERY: 'TASTY BLUES'

A master of the piano blues whose recording career stretched from Paramount 78s, through Cobra and Chess sessions, to live albums in Europe and Japan.



*Little Brother Montgomery at his home in Chicago, April 1972. Photo by Dan Kochakian. Not to be republished without permission.*

**I**f you ever wondered what it might mean to have the blues bred in the bone, listen to what Little Brother Montgomery had to say about his earliest years. “My father bought a piano when I was three or four years old”, he told his biographer Karl Gert zur Heide, “and I began to play it at the age of five... I could make up pieces on the piano at the age of five or six. The first things I started with was just two- or three-finger blues”. As he was born in 1906, we can date this to around 1911 or 1912, and already this comparatively new idiom was sufficiently embedded in the musical consciousness of African Americans in Louisiana to be what emerged naturally in a very young child’s first tentative keyboard explorations. zur Heide goes on to say “When Brother demonstrated this more than fifty years later, out came a twelve-bar blues of serene beauty”. I don’t doubt it. Montgomery’s recordings show not only that he could play the most exquisitely lovely blues, but that it was deeply rooted in his very being.

By the time he was eleven years old, around the time America entered the First World War, he was skilled enough to earn his own living playing this music, and he described to interviewers, including zur Heide and Paul Oliver, the barrelhouses (or juke, or honky-tonks – “they had several names for ‘em”) he played in and the people he learned from, a startling array of names from Papa Lord God to Burnt Face Jake. The clients at

these joints demanded the blues, and they wanted good, strong music they could dance and have a good time to. The requirement to play for hours at a time demanded not only stamina and skill, but also the ability to keep developing new ideas, coming up with new sounds. Little Brother picked up the novel techniques from other pianists – playing, for example, the walking basses that would later form the basis of boogie woogie, but that he and his fellow pianists in these early years knew as ‘Dud Low Joe’. Somewhere in all this, Little Brother, along with a group of other players, developed a piano piece that was unlike any other, and they revelled not only in its originality, but also in its sheer difficulty. He described it as “the hardest barrelhouse of any blues in history to play because you have to keep two different times going in each hand”. This remarkable composition developed over a period of years and was inevitably picked up by other players. One of these (“a feller... (who) always used to be hangin’ around us tryin’ to get in on it”) was Lee Green. Later, in St. Louis, Green would teach it to Roosevelt Sykes, who in turn, was the first to put it on a record, for Okeh in New York in 1929, under the title ‘44 Blues’. I sang the praises of this important record in an earlier article in this series, but even so it might be reasonable to suggest that the definitive version was the one that Little Brother Montgomery himself would record for Paramount a year or so later, as ‘Vicksburg Blues’.

If that seems like a long lead-up to one single recording, it’s because ‘Vicksburg Blues’ seems to me to be of such great significance in the history of the blues. In its own right, the Paramount recording is a truly great performance – as fine a blues record as any ever made, in my view – its tune haunting and beautiful as well as strange and unusual. The skill behind it is manifestly evident to anybody who cares to pay attention, but there is never a sense of it being skill for skill’s sake. The juxtaposed rhythms and the flourishes of technique, with rolling figures on the left hand, and trills and scatters of staccato notes on the right, fit together into a compelling whole, over which Montgomery sings in his odd, edgy high-pitched voice. Montgomery himself would revisit the theme for the rest of his life, still recording new versions a full half-century later. But it would also find its way, via one route or another, deep into the psyche of blues singers from Howling Wolf to Hound Dog Taylor. Sykes was still using it on a commercial recording as late as 1955 (‘Hush Oh Hush’, Imperial 5367). Jimmy ‘Duck’ Holmes included a version on his 2006 album ‘Back To Bentonia’. These are just a handful of examples. In all of this, it’s easy to miss that the flip side of Montgomery’s Paramount ‘Vicksburg Blues’ was also a masterpiece – ‘No Special Rider’ used a more conventional walking bass accompaniment, but the way he varies both rhythm and melodic figures is both technically impressive and exciting.

The year after his Paramount recording, there was another single release, this time on Melotone/Vocalion. ‘Louisiana Blues’ is a mournful slow blues in which he enhances the effect powerfully by replacing parts of the lyrics with a startling vibrato moan. The flip ‘Frisco Hi-Ball’, was every bit as impressive, a stomping boogie song, again with thrilling solos. Brilliant as it was, it seems not have encouraged the record company to try any more, and it was another four years before his next sessions. In 1935 and 1936, he recorded a total of 22 songs (plus accompaniments) for Bluebird in New Orleans, and we’re fortunate that these sides saw an official RCA release in the 1970s, presumably using the masters, so we have them in very good quality sound. Included were two new versions of ‘Vicksburg Blues’ (No. 2 and Part 3 respectively!) and a ‘Louisiana Blues Part 2’, but across the two sessions he demonstrates a repertoire that is as rich, deep and varied as you could wish for – a strolling jazzy tune in ‘Mama You Don’t Mean Me No Good’, a comic novelty in ‘Chinese Man Blues’, barrelhouse instrumentals like ‘Farish Street Jive’ and ‘Shreveport Farewell’ that somehow manage to be both graceful and rocking at the same time, and plenty of deep blues. In the last category there is one of the oddest and most captivating blues of its day, ‘The First Time I Met The Blues’. For me, this strange piece matches

any of Robert Johnson's devilish lyrics. It's somehow all the more unsettling for its more abstract content, and Montgomery again enhances the chill in the atmosphere with that eerie moaning effect. It seems like it might even have spooked the record company executives, as it was issued under the anodyne (and clearly wrong) title 'The First Time I Met You'.

All of these recordings are on 'Complete Recorded Works 1930-1936', Document DOCD-5109, whose availability seems uncertain at the time of writing. It says something about the comparative status of piano blues and guitar blues among contemporary fans that while some pre-war recordings get reissued and repackaged over and over again, these great works could slip – temporarily, I hope – out of print. Another fine collection, 'Vocal Accompaniments & Early Post-War Recordings 1930 – 1954' Document BDCD-6034, covers Montgomery's accompaniments to other singers, among other things. First, there was vaudeville blues vocalist Irene Scruggs, on four sides which immediately preceded his own Paramount session. Then Minnie Hicks, a tougher-voiced singer, who also seems to have been around at the time of the Paramount session, and then turns up again at his Melotone/Vocalion session, and whose complete recorded work survives only in two sides from the former. At one of the Bluebird sessions, there was Annie Turner, Walter Vincson and Creole George Guesnon; Montgomery accompanied all three, and Vincson played on sides by Turner and Montgomery. Turner was a fine singer, and these are high quality 1930s blues (Vincson's are not on the above CD, but on one under his own name, Document BDCD-6017). These accompaniments demonstrate that accompanying blues singers of different kinds was like falling off a log for somebody of Little Brother's abilities – not that he's coasting, but that he exhibits an ease and a facility that is always a real pleasure to listen to. Guesnon's single side is more jazz than blues, and Montgomery is entirely at home with the changes required. Note that accompaniments once credited to Montgomery on Monkey Joe Coleman's first Bluebird session, are now attributed to Coleman himself.

The records covered so far are almost all blues – a few jazzy chords here, a ragtime progression there notwithstanding. But Little Brother Montgomery, like many others, saw himself as more than just a bluesman. Earning a living from music, starting at such a young age, required flexibility and a broader-based repertoire – the songs he listed to Karl Gert zur Heide that he had played in his early years included titles as diverse as 'Twelfth Street Rag' and 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary'. From quite early on, too, Montgomery had played in jazz bands, and based in New Orleans in the 1920s, he worked with many of the great musicians in that city; Sam Morgan, George Lewis, Danny Barker, Harold Dejan are just a few of the names that crop up in his reminiscences. It was in a jazz band that he would appear on his first issued recordings of the post-war era, together with New Orleans musicians Lee Collins (trumpet) and Oliver Alcorn (sax) and a Chicago rhythm section, in 1947. These four sides are on the last-mentioned Document CD, and the range covered is telling: 'El Ritmo' starts and finishes with Latin rhythms, 'Swinging With Lee' is an up-tempo sixteen-bar traditional jazz tune, and the remaining two sides are vocal blues, one slow and one up-tempo. Also from the 1940s are two short sets of solos, for Disc Records in 1946/7 on 'Blues Piano Orgy', Delmark DL 626 (including one vocal, a fine 'No Special Rider') and for Regal in 1949, on the above Document CD, all instrumental. All of these show that the intervening years had done nothing to diminish his solo piano capabilities.

In the 1950s there was sporadic recording activity, even if there were few issued records to show for it at the time. A 1951 session for Atlantic with drummer Frank 'Sweet' Williams was unissued for twenty years, and only one track is currently available on CD 'Atlantic Blues: Piano', Atlantic CD



Little Brother Montgomery at his home in Chicago, April 1972. Photo by Dan Kochakian. Not to be republished without permission.



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7567816942. Two 1953 sides for JOB had to wait thirty years for release on a Flyright LP, and may or may not be available at present. They'd have made a very attractive pairing on a JOB 78, although in all honesty, you can see why they seem to have been deemed unsuitable for the contemporary market. From two long sessions in 1954 and 1956 only four tracks were issued, on a ten-inch LP on the Winding Ball label shared with trumpet-player Natty Dominique (one side each). I think all four of these (plus one more that appeared many years later on a Saydisc LP), especially an outstanding piano/vocal version of 'Cow Cow Blues' are exceptionally good piano blues records that really don't deserve their obscurity, but at least they are there, tucked away at the end of the second Document CD. What hasn't made it to such a reissue release (yet, anyway) are five rare sides cut for the Chicago label, Ebony, in 1956. Montgomery was a fixture as accompanist with the label and also appears on sides by St. Louis Jimmy and others.

If his recorded accompaniments in the pre-war years involved mostly minor figures, in the post war years it was quite a different story. There isn't room here to go through all of his post-war accompaniments but it would be wrong to pass on without mentioning some key moments. If we start just before the end of the war, in 1944, there's two sides by Joe McCoy (as Big Joe And His Rhythm), available on 'The McCoy Brothers, Vol. 2', Document BDCD-6020, that you might – at a stretch – describe as proto-r&b. Not great records, but by no means bad, despite a certain chaotic edge that can't be blamed on Montgomery's solid presence. More interesting was a 1953 session for JOB with McCoy's ex-wife and her new husband, Memphis Minnie and Little Son Joe – Minnie's classic 'Kissing In The Dark' is just one highlight of a fine set that Montgomery enhances all the way through with his steady, fluid rhythms and melodic complements. They're all available on Minnie's box set 'Queen Of The Delta Blues Volume 2', JSP 7741. His reputation in blues circles in Chicago must have still been strong later in the 1950s or he's unlikely to have been asked to take part in sessions by three of the up-and-coming stars of the day, Magic Sam, Otis Rush and Buddy Guy. At Guy's March 1960 Chess session the young guitarist covered one of his venerable pianist's finest songs, and the resulting version of the great 'First Time I Met The Blues' is as good as anything that artist has ever done, available on 'The Complete Chess Studio Recordings', MCD 09337.

In 1960, Paul Oliver made his famous field trip to the USA on behalf of the BBC, and Little Brother not only featured talking and playing on the resulting 'Conversation With The Blues', but also shared an album of informal recordings with Sunnyland Slim. Originally released on LP on 77 records, they were reissued on CD by Wolf in Europe 'The La Salle Chicago





Label shots courtesy B&R Archive, Victor Pearlín, Dan Kochakian.



Edith Wilson, with Little Brother Montgomery (lower left) and the State Street Swingers, circa 1993. Photo Mikki Ferrill.

Blues Recordings Vol. 1', Wolf CD 120.296, and Southland in the USA ('Chicago Blues Session', Southland SCD-010), at least one of which must still be in print. It's thoroughly enjoyable, although now not offering much that you can't get on other albums. In the same year came Montgomery's first LP under his own name, 'Tasty Blues', originally on Bluesville, now on OBC CD-554-2. This is a very different kind of record, and I must confess I used to have a real problem with it, feeling that Lafayette Thomas's electric guitar often seemed to be drowning out the named artist. But in time I've changed my mind completely – not for the first time in my life, I was simply missing the point. There are plenty of other albums where you can hear Montgomery's piano in all its glory, and if you approach this one more as a contemporary duo performance, you can see that the two musicians complement each other perfectly. Yes, they bump into each other, but generally in ways that enhance the vitality and freshness of the music, and that offer rewards of a very different kind to those on any of Montgomery's other albums.

Also that year, Montgomery travelled to Europe for the first time, and cut an album in UK Columbia's Lansdowne Jazz Series. In real contrast to those duets with Lafayette Thomas, here we have sidemen like Alexis Korner and Ken Colyer. The album isn't available now, but three tracks can be found on a new anthology 'British Traditional Jazz At A Tangent, Vol. 2', Lake LACD317, including a lovely version of 'Buddy Bolden's Blues' with Colyer adding an agreeably plaintive trumpet. While he was in the UK, Montgomery visited Francis Wilford Smith at his home in Sussex and several long, informal sessions were captured on tape. None of this was issued for many years, but eventually some appeared on two excellent Flyright LPs in the 1980s. These are now out of print, but I have heard reliable reports that there may be further material from these sessions released on CD soon.

One album where you can hear Montgomery entirely on his own is his Folkways set from 1961, 'Blues', Smithsonian Folkways FW 03527, available as a custom CD or a download. In contrast to the Bluesville, which was trying for a more up-to-date sound, the Folkways is a deliberate exploration of Little Brother's musical heritage, and it is a delight all the way, offering new versions of several of his 1930s pieces, in good, clear sound, as well as other unheard material. A second LP from the same sessions, 'Farro Street Jive' (sic), Smithsonian Folkways FW 31014, which wasn't released until several years later, continues the exploration and is an ideal complement. Then, Folkways had him back in a year later to record an album of sacred material, 'Church Songs', FW FW31042. This makes entirely enjoyable listening, working the same kind of seam as the New

Orleans jazz versions of songs like 'Down By The Riverside' and 'Saints'. It certainly offers a different angle on Brother's music, but I'd put it further down a recommended list than most of the secular LPs.

Next, as if to underline his range, and his refusal to be typecast as one particular kind of musician, came two albums in Riverside's Living Legends series, which were much more like jazz sessions, one with Mama Yancey and the other under his own name (on CD as 'South Side Blues', OBCCD-508-2 and OBCCD-525-2), and Montgomery sounds just as much at home in that context as in any other. Bear in mind that in half a dozen or so albums, over only two to three years, this remarkable musician has delivered entirely credible sessions respectively of contemporary urban blues, solo barrelhouse piano, gospel and traditional jazz.

His versatility was clearly very important to him, and in the mid-1960s, when he started his own label, the first 45 rpm release (FM 1000) was a pair of Tin Pan Alley-type songs, 'She's My One And Only Desire' and 'All My Love'. FM 1001 featured another version of 'Vicksburg Blues', and FM 1002 brought things right up-to-date with 'Mini Skirt Blues'. Of these, only FM 1002 can be heard in digital form, on the Earwig LP noted below. By this time, he was working with the young vocalist Jeanne Carroll, and she features on an album he made for Adelphi in 1969, now available as 'No Special Rider', Adelphi GCD 9913. I like Carroll's voice, which is strong and true, although I admit that I probably wouldn't buy one of her records if her accompanist wasn't a great bluesman, and she only sings on a couple of tracks, anyway. What makes this album stand out more is a seven-minute track where Brother talks about his early attempts at playing piano, complete with musical examples.

Into the 1970s: in Europe he recorded a fine live album in Amstelveen, Holland, 'Bajez Copper Station', Blues Beacon CD BLU-1002 and an even better studio session in Copenhagen, now available as 'Blues Masters Vol. 7', Storyville CD 8007 (other tracks from the latter are on Storyville samplers, including an exquisite 'Joe Louis Blues' on 'Barrelhouse Blues & Boogie Woogie Vol.2', Storyville STCD 8044). Also in the 1970s Delmark released what must be the very jazziest album under Little Brother Montgomery's name, 'Goodbye Mister Blues', Delmark DE-663, credited to him and his State Street Swingers. This was a fine, fairly substantial band including trombonist Preston Jackson, Oliver Alcorn on sax and clarinet and Banjo Ike Robinson, and they do more than justice to standards like 'Strutting With Some Barbecue', 'Saturday Night Function' and 'Panama Rag' as well as plenty of blues.

In the 1980s, he was still touring and playing, and JSP recorded him at the 100 Club in London in 1981, an album which they haven't (yet?) reissued, but which I mention in passing because I was fortunate to have been in the audience that night, and cherish the memories. One more album I will mention is an Earwig collection, first issued in 1983, but now available in digital form, 'At Home', Earwig 4918, a miscellany of material from various later sources and dates, including both sides of one of his FM 45s, and a vocal by his wife, Jan Montgomery, as well as a song dedicated to her (called, not surprisingly, 'Jan') – and, of course, lots of fine piano playing, not least on an excellent rendition of 'The Rocks'.

All that, and there's several albums I haven't covered, like a live one from Japan, another jazzy Delmark with Edith Wilson and the sole LP on his own FM label (with The Jazz All Stars), long out of print. Nor have I attempted to cover all the many albums which feature Little Brother on a few tracks (from AFBF tours, for example, from 'The Devil's Music' soundtrack or in the 'I Blueskvarter' series).

Of the later albums, you could pick out the Folkways or the Storyville for great solo piano, the Bluesville to show him working creatively with another musician, and the Delmark for his jazz work. But Little Brother Montgomery's pre-war recordings, I'd say, are as vital as anybody's. As I suggested above, piano blues has never enjoyed the same acclaim as guitar blues – if it did, Little Brother's masterpieces would be essential in every blues fan's collection.

Little Brother Montgomery must have been one of the first bluesmen to have a biography published, and Karl Ger zur Heide's fine 'Deep South Blues Piano', Studio Vista, 1970 is still the key work. Thanks also to Klaus Kilian and Stefan Wirz.