

# Easy Street

John James &  
Peter Berryman

**Lead Guitar**

**Rhythm Guitar**

**Rhythm Guitar**

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# Blues—Its History & Performance

by John James



Alonzo Johnson, better known as 'Lonnie', is a unique figure in the story of the blues. Few rival him in his musical accomplishment and in the longevity—none too common on the blues scene!—of his career.

He was born in New Orleans on February 8, 1894, into a large musical family. His father had a string band, and young Lonnie was soon recruited into its ranks, making his first public appearance on the violin. Leaving school, he worked in a sawmill and must have heard 'the blues' played and sung at work. Eventually he started to learn the guitar and the piano and by the time he left home in his early twenties he was an accomplished musician.

Apparently, he visited England during the First World War as part of a stage show sent over to entertain the U.S. Troops . . . does this make him the first 'bluesman' to tour here? Well, returning to his home in New Orleans after the War, Lonnie met with a tragedy that was to shape his future life. The city had been decimated by an outbreak of influenza that claimed a higher death toll than had the Great War. Lonnie lost thirteen members of his family, mum, dad, brothers, sisters . . . he felt he had to leave the city, he found it difficult to stay, too many memories to cope with, and he packed his guitar and took to the road. The first stop was St. Louis.

In contrast to many a 'blues guitarist', who knew a few licks, and all in the same key, Lonnie Johnson was a very

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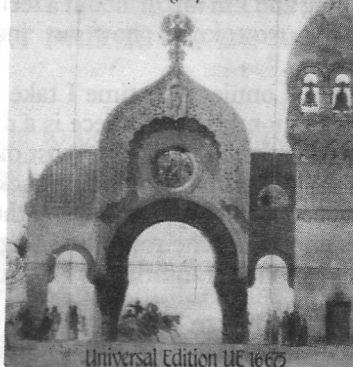
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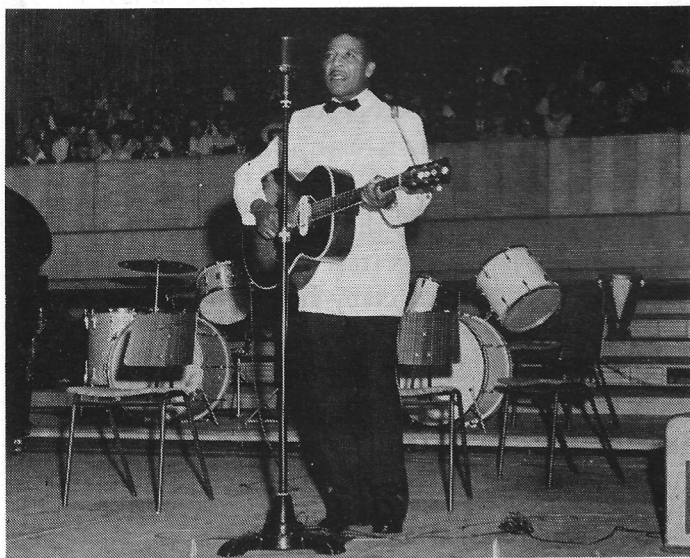
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accomplished musician who could, literally, 'play anything'. He was never short of work, playing violin, piano and guitar, he could sit-in with popular orchestras such as Charlie Creath's 'Jazz-O-Maniacs', and earn a very comfortable living. His music took him all over the States, recording in New York, Chicago, Memphis, San Antonio . . . Lonnie was in great demand.

In 1925 he won a talent competition which earned him a seven year contract with Okeh Records; this launched a recording career that spanned forty years. His command of a number of instruments and unending stream of blues themes and melodic ideas, the sweet-flowing guitar lines, that honey-toned voice, all made Lonnie a very popular solo artiste. But he also was in demand as a band-member and accompanist. He played with Louis Armstrong, Jimmy Noone, Johnny Dodds and even with the one and only Duke Ellington. Lonnie's refined guitar technique compliments the rough 'n' tough singing of Texas Alexander, with whom Lonnie recorded many sides. Alexander was a manual worker, an 'ex-con', or as his agent put it . . . "had seen much of the inside of the Texas Penitentiary system" and with a somewhat free-form vocal style it needed all the skill of a musician, the calibre of Lonnie Johnson, to accompany Texas Alexander on live recordings.

But Lonnie's place in the 'Guitar Hall of Fame' was earned by the masterpieces he recorded with Eddie Lang.

Eddie Lang, born Salvatore Massaro in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania of middle class Italian parents, was a genius in his own right. He had accompanied Bessie Smith, made many hit records with Annette 'That's All' Hanshaw, set a standard for guitar-violin duets with Joe Venuti that is still adhered to today; and don't forget those Venuti-Lang records made in the 1920s, must have found their way over to France with the American Servicemen, and it is hard to envisage that Django Reinhardt and Stefan Grapelli did not hear them. Well, if playing with Lonnie Johnson was not enough of a claim to fame, howsabout, Bing Crosby stipulating on his recording contracts that on all sessions the guitarist must be Eddie Lang!



Impressed? So, the scene was set for these two wonderful guitar players to record a set of timeless music, that would outlive all the fashions and the fads of the day. An unlikely pairing, coming from diverse social backgrounds, and each successful in their respective idioms, who could have foreseen the impact that the music they recorded in New York in 1928, would have on guitar players for generations to come. Some forty years later, Parlophone (U.K.) issued 'Blue Guitars'; an album featuring six of these duets, four features from Eddie Lang, and four superb solos from Lonnie Johnson. These solos were recorded in Memphis in 1928, and were titled . . .

*Playing with the Strings, Stompin' 'em along Slow, Away down in the Alley Blues and Blues in G.* Much respected Jazz and Blues writer and broadcaster, Brian Rust claims . . . "Lonnie Johnson's four brilliant unaccompanied guitar solos, are perhaps the finest of their kind on record anywhere, anytime. Never is there any suggestion of wearisome repetition of the soloist being at a loss for an idea." High praise indeed!

Parlophone subsequently issued volume two. On both albums all the duets are credited to 'Dunn-Johnson'. Johnson is, of course, Lonnie, while Dunn is Blind Willie Dunn, an alias used by Lang to avoid contractual problems. Eddie Lang died on March 26 1933, it's amazing how, in such a short time, he managed to do so much. We are grateful to him for leaving such a legacy.

Anyway, Lonnie eventually got tired of travelling and took a 'day job' and settled for a while in Galesburg, Illinois. But soon, our guitar genius tired of the novelty of working in a steel-works was soon back in St. Louis playing those blues and anything else besides. He played six and twelve string guitar, favouring a small-bodied Martin, twelve frets to the body, and played with a plectrum or struck the strings with his thumb. Apart from being a great guitar player and doubling on other instruments, Lonnie was also a fine singer. Great instrumentalists don't necessarily make good singers, Lonnie was an exception. All his career long he was in demand as a soloist and accompanist, until he finally retired—so he thought—in Philadelphia, taking a part-time job as a hotel janitor. But the 'bluesers', those irrepressible enthusiasts searched him out and found him. He was enticed back on the road again, by now a senior citizen! He toured Europe with Lippmann and Rau's American Folk Blues Festival 1963. I remember it well.

About this time Lonnie spoke about his early, happy days in New Orleans, before he lost his family . . . (It was) . . . "Strictly blues all the way on the violin and I made several numbers on the piano. I used to play piano for a while, but only blues no popular songs. Then I bought my guitar, I bought it in 1917. It's a beautiful instrument . . . and at night, take a small wash tub, fill it up with water, sit down on the steps and set that tub of water down. You sit down there and play it and let that sound come through the water, and you talkin' something beautiful . . . oh brother! . . . I'm not kidding and I'm talkin' about a feeling, it sounds sweeter, goes further, you know how an instrument sounds on the water . . ."

Well, Lonnie, next time I take a bath . . .

This month's study piece is a duet, but with the help of a cassette machine I'm sure most of you will be able to record the rhythm guitar and on playback, join in with the lead part. *Easy Street* was a piece put together by Peter Berryman and myself as a tribute to Eddie Lang and Lonnie Johnson, and released on a Transatlantic L.P. titled 'Sky in my Pie', many years ago.

The piece is a slow blues in 'D', and fairly simple to play. The rhythm guitar should be played in strict tempo with the bass notes on the 2nd and 4th beats of each bar, played either with the thumb or first finger (right hand). The chord sequence is D-D7-G-Gmi-A-A7-D/G-D/A7. The tablature gives you the lead guitar's fingerboard positions, the actual fingering I shall leave to you. The triplets at the beginning of the variations (bars 9-16) can be played by barré over four strings at the seventh position and sliding the whole barré from the seventh fret to the sixth and back again. The notes can also be individually fretted. In all the triplet figures only the first note of each is played with the right hand, the two other notes being sounded by the movement of the left hand.

O.K. . . . now search out those Lonnie Johnson records and listen to the master!