

Finding 'Son' House

Step by Step, They Followed a Trail That Led to Forgotten Blues Singer

His name is Eddie "Son" House and back in the 1930s he was considered among the best of the blues singers who lived in the Mississippi Delta country. His harsh, "guttily" singing told of life among the Negroes during the Depression. The words are not pretty; they tell of working in the fields for long hours and little money, but with the hope that "the sun's gonna shine on my back door someday."

In 1942, he made some recordings for folklorist Allen Lomax, who visited him in Mississippi on a field trip for the Library of Congress. Shortly afterward, Son House disappeared.

No one in the music field saw him after that for more than 20 years. By this week, when the city's annual Folk Festival is staged at Newport, R.I., Son House will be on the program, singing

Author Richard A. Waterman is a Boston journalist who often writes about folk music.

the same Delta blues he sang three decades ago. His style hasn't changed; he still plays what folklorists call "bottle-neck guitar"—a style of performing that produces a whining sound by faying the neck of a bottle, or a piece of metal pipe, across the guitar strings.

Search Covers 16 States

Son House will be at Newport because three folklorists found him living in an apartment in Rochester, N.Y. The search for him, conducted by me and two other men, covered 16 states and 4,000 miles. This is the story of that search.

The hunt began last April, when a Memphis blues singer named Bukka White was playing a three-day engagement in Boston. While there, he stayed with a young blues fan named Phil Spiro. One evening the two were listening to some recordings of old-time singers, and Mr. White said a friend of his had reported seeing Mr. House in Memphis less than a year ago.

That was enough to spark Mr. Spiro's interest. But he had precious little else to go on. He knew Mr. House had recorded for the now-defunct Paramount

town, because a note on the back of a record album said that Mr. House had once lived there.

Mr. Wilkins walked the cotton fields with us day after day, talking to people who might have known Son House, or might know where he had moved to. "Fiddlin' Joe" Martin, a musician who had also known Mr. House many years ago, joined us in our daily trips. The elimination of lead after lead was painstakingly slow, and the search moved into its second week.

The hot, dusty days were spent talking to people as they hoed cotton and soybeans, walked by the side of Highway 81, or sat in small bunches by general stores. At night we visited people whom we had been unable to locate during the day, and talked with them on the steps of their shacks, fanning ourselves against oppressive heat and humidity.

The trail finally led to Benjamin Brown, Sr., whose son had once been married to Mr. House's stepdaughter. He was a patient at the Kennedy Veterans Hospital in Memphis. We asked if he knew where Son House was living now.

He thought a minute and said, "He's living somewhere in New York state. It's . . . um . . . Winchester."

"Could it be Rochester?" we asked. "His eyes lit up with recognition. "That's it. It's Rochester, New York."

No Listing for Son House

An immediate call to Rochester information elicited no Eddie House, but at least we had eliminated other Northern cities from consideration. We went to see Benjamin Brown, Jr. He said Mr. House's stepdaughter was now living in Detroit and had married the son of Mrs. Grace Strong of Robinsonville.

Mrs. Strong gave us her son's telephone number in Detroit, and we called him the following day. He said that Son was still alive.

We gave us Son's Rochester address. We immediately sent off a telegram asking Mr. House to call us collect.

No telephone call came the following day. We called Detroit again and obtained the name and phone number of James Knox, with whom Mr. House and his wife had once lived. It took several calls to reach Mr. Knox, but he promised to drive to where Mr. House was now living and have him call back.

Contact at 11:08

The phone rang at 11:08 a.m. on June 21. It was Son House. He said he was in good health and would be happy to record and travel again.

We left Memphis the following day and drove straight to Rochester. When we drove up to a four-story apartment building at 51 Greig St., a neatly dressed man and woman were waiting on the steps.

Mr. Spiro asked, "Can you tell us which apartment Son House lives in?"

The man smiled and extended his



—Alan Grossman

e knowledgeable about e action.

Curbstone the Slums

company's producer and one of rs, "grow up without theater. at tragedy—like being denied light."

reet players are trying to fill r many low-income sections by ringing the theater to the peo- steps. Everything they need—tain, props, sound equipment. —is transported in a rented dch frequently doubles as a oom. They assemble the stage, he play, then pack up and

led in 1962

mpany was formed in the sum- 62 as an outgrowth of a play professional and neighborhood the East Fourth Street Better- ociation's annual street fair. om: the Aaron E. Norman Fund he troupe to put on several summer, including Chekhov's The current season is financed totaling \$6,500 from the Nor- , the New York State Council ts, and the Louise L. Ottinger Trust.

pany pays the performers' sala- i gets \$50 a week, the off- minimum under Actors Equity and other expenses. The cos- e loaned by the American re Festival and Academy of Conn., and the curtains and e from the off-Broadway Gate hose owner, Lily Turner, is the general manager.



Or.

It's only half-pa ready more than 1 or new editions of been published this among those that ha interest. Comment: views that appear: tional Observer.

FICTION

Home Is the S Amada, translated guese by Harriet: c 238 pages; \$4.95)—Th chor's fable about e and misadventure: mariner is "one c books since Huecke

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The Spire, by V (Harcourt, Brace & \$3.95)—A medieval builds a 400-foot church despite the his master mason a Whether seen as e gory, a study of the vision and practice

...the other expenses. The costumes are loaned by the American Fare Festival and Academy of Art, Conn., and the curtains and drapery from the off-Broadway Gate whose owner, Lily Turner, is the "general manager."

More than 500 Negro children attended operated day camps converged on one day last week to see the performance of this season's production, an English version of *A Doctor of Himself*. The kids and a scattering of teachers and parents sat on wooden benches that students had taken to the courtyard from the gymnasium of the dingy, gray-walled school. The kids found shelter from the blazing afternoon sun under umbrellas. Some of nearby tenements trickled in children too young to attend school and their street games to inspect the curiosity.

#### Acting Start

In the prologue, two monologues in Spanish and Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* got the show off to a rousing start—most of them didn't know Spanish, says the children howled Julia, in the role of Launce, bawled with gusto and berated his bored mother for not weeping at his departure for

the audience's exuberance was suspended by the buffoonery of the first couple of Moliere's *Seventeenth Century Comedy*. The kids laughed and loudly applauded the bibulous woodcutter Sganarelle, played by Matt Conley as he is the shrewish wife (Miss Reynolds) on the stage and whacked her with

more characters made their appearance and extended dialog displaced the youngsters' attention waned. The spots began to appear on the benches. In the end, only about a dozen children remained to catch the show tossed to them by the cast.

who stayed, however, gave the indication they enjoyed the show. Conley didn't follow much of the plot, but the important. Mr. Conley's red nose, his accent, and outlandish garb were enough to make anyone laugh—even spectators who are predominately foreign-speaking.

#### Audience Reaction

A 3-year-old Mike Weeks said he enjoyed the whole play, but his favorite part was in the guy (Sganarelle) was beautiful. "Raiph Brown, I assessed the production as "pretty good," but not as good as the other play he had seen, a production of *Cinderella*.

Do the players work for minimum wage in productions that contribute nothing to their professional stature? Matt Conley, who was featured in *A Day After Tomorrow* on Broadway, does it for acting experience. Mr. Conley, who is acting debut as Kit Carleton in a silent-screen Western, has long-range hope that the troupe will bring theater audiences of the kind that Clarice Taylor, an alumna of the school and an ardent civil-rights activist is trying to impress on young people that racial barriers can be overcome. No female members of the cast are Negroes.

Although their motivations are different, the actors all share the common goal of bringing at least a dollop of culture to the lives.

—DANIEL GREENE



Son House: A rich and throaty voice.

Company in 1930, but that all but two of those records were believed broken or lost.

Then came the Lomax recordings and Mr. House's subsequent disappearance. None of his old friends knew anything about him, but it was often rumored he had moved to a Northern city.

Mr. White said the identification of Mr. House in Memphis had been made by Lillian Glover, a Memphis blues singer who performs under the name "Ma Rainey"—no relation to the great original Ma Rainey. Mr. Spiro called Ma Rainey, and she acknowledged she had seen Son House in Memphis last year.

To pursue the search, Mr. Spiro contacted Nick Perls, a blues fan and record collector from New York City, and me. We left New York on June 10, in a Volkswagen loaded down with suitcases, recording equipment, and sleeping bags.

#### Walking the Cotton Fields

Upon arriving in Memphis, we learned that Ma Rainey had been unable to find out any additional news. Other people had apparently seen Mr. House in Memphis at about the same time, but they knew little except that Mr. House "had gone north again."

But we were lucky to meet the Rev. Robert Wilkins, a former blues singer who had known Mr. House in the 1930s. He agreed to help us in our search. Our first stop was Lake Cormorant, Miss., a cotton



Three folklorists and their find. From left, Nick Perls, Dick Waterman, Son House, Phil Spiro. Searchers were two weeks on the trail.

...drove up to a four-story apartment building at 61 Greig St., a neatly dressed man and woman were waiting on the steps.

Mr. Spiro asked, "Can you tell us which apartment Son House lives in?"

The man smiled and extended his hand. "This is him," he said. I looked at my watch and made a mental note that the search for Son House had ended at exactly 8:33 p.m. on June 23, 1964—two weeks after it had begun.

We stayed in Rochester for three days, listening to Son House play again. He was nervous at first, and confessed he hadn't played regularly for about four years.

#### His Voice Grows Richer

By the time we left, however, he was again playing as well as he had over 30 years ago, and singing in a voice that had become even richer and more throaty.

Returning to New York, I contacted the Newport Folk Festival committee and asked if it could make plans on short notice to include Mr. House on the 1964 program. Ralph Rinzler, musician and folklorist in charge of Newport's selection of talent, heard the tape recordings we had made in Rochester and immediately extended an invitation for Mr. House to appear. Four record companies soon expressed interest in recording him.

Mr. House is still rather bemused by all the excitement. Since moving to Rochester, he had worked as a railroad porter, barbecue cook, and as the private chef of a gangster who was at the Appalachian Convention. He has been unemployed in recent years, though, and had no thoughts of becoming a performing musician again.

"I thought the old music was all forgotten by now," he told us. "I never knew that so many people would want to hear it again."

His memory of the days when "country blues" was at its peak is amazingly sharp. His contemporaries—Charlie Patton, Willie Brown, Robert Johnson, and others—are mostly dead, so Mr. House's recollections will be a boon to folklorists.

I told Son that if he hadn't been back in Memphis last year to visit relatives, he never would have been seen there, and later rediscovered.

He shook his head and added a bizarre exclamation point to our trip.

"Oh no. That couldn't have been me. I haven't been back to Memphis in almost 15 years."

—RICHARD A. WATERMAN

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## The Movie

# From Lit For McH

Remember when film one or two comic sup Skelton or Bud Abbott packed the local movie yesterday, before television comedy star is often rounded by a menagerie

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do every week on TV characters steal the show

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#### A Date With the B

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Next to McHale, the thing in Bingham's Parker (Tim Conway) glung, bumbling exec