

Moses Rascoe
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Moses Rascoe was introduced at the 1989 Celebration of Traditional Music as a blues guitarist who had only been playing the blues since 1983. In reality, Rascoe had been playing the blues since his mother bought him his first guitar around 1930. He had just never decided to turn his avocation into a trade, hanging on to the security of a day job as a truck driver instead.

His first and only commercial album was recorded in 1987 and revealed a relaxed mature artist equally at ease at adapting to his own style blues from different regional and stylistic schools as he was at interpolating into the mix material from other traditional repertoires including old-time country and gospel. Rascoe soon became a darling of blues aficionados as one of last remaining elder statesmen of rural blues and was featured at many important blues events and at festivals including the revived Newport Folk Festival and the River Blues Festival. Except for a version of “Scooba Doo” that appeared on a Newport Festival compilation from 1988, none of Rascoe’s other recordings surfaced commercially. Berea’s Department of Special Collections and Archives has audio recordings of Rascoe’s performance of 19 songs at CTM 1989; 11 of these songs are not available on Rascoe’s commercially available recordings. VHS performance footage of 11 of the songs is also available at the Berea archives.

Moses Rascoe was born Jul 27, 1917, near Windsor, North Carolina, closer to the coast than to Appalachia. He certainly was not a folk musician with regard to how he learned his craft; with most of his music learned off the radio and records, which is likely why it betrays only a slight partiality toward rural sounds (Shay: 40).

In Rascoe’s world, Jimmy Reed’s “[Bright Lights, Big City](#)” and “[Big Boss Man](#)” (c. 1950s) sit comfortably alongside earlier urban blues from Atlanta (c. 1930s) – for instance, Blind Willie McTell’s “Let Me Play with Yo’ Yo-Yo” and “[Georgia Rag](#)” and Blind Boy Fuller’s “[Step It Up and Go](#)” – or even older examples from the country-to-city journey of the blues such as Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell’s “[How Long Blues](#)” (1928), or the earliest of urban blues i.e. the vaudeville blues of Bessie Smith’s “[Backwater Blues](#)” and the Ma Rainey staple “[C. C. Rider](#).” In Rascoe’s hands, though, the urban varnish and in some cases the clamor is stripped off the songs and they are rendered with the calm characteristic of alternating-thumb guitarist/songsters typically associated with the southeast and with Appalachian foothills. Rascoe was born in the former region and since 1938, had been based in the latter region in York, Pennsylvania.

Rascoe’s guitar picking style was essentially an individuated variant of melodic alternating-thumb fingerpicking, although depending upon the song he often switched to single note melodic lines, blues licks, or the sliding chordal dyads and triads typical of a slow 12-bar urban blues. He sometimes chose a tune from one blues style and rendered it in another – for instance, he interpreted Blind Lemon Jefferson’s rural blues “[Matchbox Blues](#)” as a T-Bone Walker-style West Coast slow blues. Well over half of his repertoire, however, comprised of traditional tunes particularly suited to his core melodic fingerpicking style. These included Brownie McGhee’s favorite “[Deep Sea Diver](#),” the traditional blues ballads “[Stagalee](#)” and “[Frankie and Johnny](#),” Blind Willie McTell’s “[Georgia Rag](#),” and the traditional Southern religious favorite “[Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone](#)” (recorded in both black and white Southern gospel versions by artists including Five Blind Boys of Alabama, Sam Cooke, Tennessee Ernie Ford, the Jordannaires, and Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver).

Also interesting to note is Rascoe’s use of an electric pickup on his acoustic flat-top steel-string guitar at the CTM performances which contrasts with the microphone-

recorded acoustic guitar sound on his commercial recordings. Like [Etta Baker](#), Rascoe plays to the specific advantages of the medium in accordance with material and only on the more contemporary urban blues and boogie interpretations does he exploit the overdrive and sustain ensuing from the electric pick-up and amplifier set-up.

On the numbers from ragtime and piedmont blues guitar repertoire, which largely call for the melodic alternative-thumb style, Rascoe tends to not hold melodic notes much longer than when he played to a more acoustic setup. Like the rural Texas bluesman Sam Lightnin' Hopkins, one of the early rural blues musicians to record with an electric guitar, Rascoe reveals a perceptive understanding of the distinction between using electricity as merely a medium for amplifying volume (which he does on the traditionally acoustic numbers) and its use in actively shaping the music itself (as in the urban blues and boogie-woogie songs).

Moses Rascoe passed away on March 6, 1994, in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, another small town in the Appalachian foothills north of York. In his obituary for *Sing Out!*, columnist Gene Shay called Rascoe the “last great blues artist from a generation that included rural masters like Mississippi John Hurt, Fred McDowell, and Sonny Terry.” (Shay: 41)

Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:

Celebration of Traditional Music recordings:

Audio:

- CTM 1989: 19 songs contained on 4 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-419, 421, 422, 424); all have reference copies on audio cassette. 11 of these songs are not available on Rascoe's commercial recordings.

Video:

- CTM 1989: 13 Songs on VHS: AC-VT-089-001

Commercial Recordings:

- Moses Rascoe: *Blues* (Flying Fish 454): Moses Rascoe did not turn professional until 1983 and was not recorded until 1987, when he was captured live at the Godfrey Daniels Coffeehouse in Bethlehem, PA. This remained the only album-length project Rascoe ever recorded. Rascoe is accompanied on harmonica by Ken Werner and plays an acoustic guitar captured through a microphone (allmusic.com). In contrast, at the Celebration of Traditional Music in 1989, Rascoe played unaccompanied but with an acoustic guitar that employed an electric pickup and was played through an amplifier.
- Various Artists: *Ben & Jerry's Newport Folk Festival 88*: Rascoe appears on this live compilation playing “Scooba Doo.”

References:

Shay, Gene. 1995. “Last Chorus: Moses Rascoe 1918-1994.” *Sing Out* 39/1. 40-41.

Additional Bibliography:

Roberts, Jack Lundy. 1989. “Moses Rascoe.” *Living Blues* 87/Jul-Aug 1989. 23-25.