

This Day in History... October 24, 1911

Birth of Sonny Terry

Born on October 24, 1911, Saunders Terrell became Sonny Terry, a blues harmonica player known for making his instrument sound like trains, hounds, and other voices. After childhood accidents left him blind, he built a career that took him from local churches and dance halls to Carnegie Hall and concert stages around the world.

Terry was born near Greensboro, Georgia, to a farming family. His father, Ruben, played harmonica in the evenings and eventually taught his son blues tunes. He also showed him how to imitate train whistles and baying dogs. Terry was injured in two accidents, one when he was 11 and another at 16. The second left him blind. Unable to continue farm work, he began playing harmonica in churches and dance halls. At 19, he joined traveling medicine shows, performing in towns across the South.

Terry became part of the folk music revival of the late 1950s. He toured Europe and performed and recorded with musicians such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. He also appeared on Broadway. He was in the cast of *Finian's Rainbow* in 1947 and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in the 1950s. Later, he and McGhee performed in the Steve Martin comedy *The Jerk*. Terry also appeared in *The Color Purple* and played harmonica on Ry Cooder's "Walkin' Away Blues" for the 1986 film *Crossroads*.

By the early 1930s, Terry was living in Durham, North Carolina. He played at tobacco warehouses, fish fries, house parties, and on the street. In 1934, he met guitarist and singer Blind Boy Fuller. The two performed together, and Terry accompanied Fuller on recordings beginning in 1937. Terry also made recordings under his own name. In 1938, he performed at Carnegie Hall as part of John Hammond's *From Spirituals to Swing* concert. The next day, folklorist Alan Lomax recorded Terry for the Library of Congress, including his versions of "Fox Chase" and "Lost John."



Terry added his distinctive harmonica to Guthrie's folk songs, including "Lost John," a track later included on Struggle. He also recorded with Guthrie and singer Cisco Houston, blending blues harmonica with Guthrie's songs about working people.

After Fuller died in 1941, Terry formed a long-running partnership with guitarist and singer Brownie McGhee. They moved to New York and performed together for decades, recording blues, folk songs, and ballads. Their 1958 album *Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing* was their first for Folkways Records. Terry and McGhee also appeared together on radio, in stage shows, and on television. Their partnership lasted about 40 years, though they split for a time around 1970 and later reunited for performances.

Terry's sound was immediately recognizable. He played fast, high notes and added whoops, moans, and sharp cries. He cupped his hands around the harmonica to shape its tone and used a cross-note technique to play in keys beyond the instrument's basic range. In "Fox Chase," he used his harmonica and voice to suggest a hunt, complete with the sounds of hounds. "Lost John" shows his control of breath and rhythm.

In 1982, Terry received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the nation's highest honor in folk and traditional arts. He continued recording into the 1980s, including the album *Whoopin'*, released in 1984. Terry died on March 11, 1986, at age 74. His energetic harmonica style helped carry blues into folk clubs, concert halls, and recordings heard by audiences far beyond the South.



From the 1998 Folk Musicians Issue



Terry and Seeger brought harmonica, banjo, and vocals together for a Carnegie Hall performance in 1957, later released as an album. Their lively, audience-friendly folk style is heard on songs such as "Bottle Up and Go."

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