

Brownie McGhee & Sonny Terry - the demise of their relationship
by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

I knew both Brownie & Sonny, from 1968 on. They had been together as a duo since they were hooked up after Blind Boy Fuller's death, whom Sonny often worked with. Brownie cut a record, "Death of Blind Boy Fuller," & was professionally known as "Blind Boy Fuller's Buddy" in his early performing days. They appeared as a duo, fairly happily for over 30 years, including on Broadway in the hit plays "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof," & "Finnian's Rainbow." Brownie lived not far from me in Oakland, CA, & I spent many hours with him, helped him shop for groceries due to his difficulty 'getting around' due to polio as a youth/one leg was considerably shorter than the other/& he wore a therapeutic brace, & I spent hours at his home, where he taught me much about his guitar style while we were sitting around the kitchen table, off & on from 1968 until his death. His falling out with Sonny seems to have begun in the mid-to late 1970s, & I cannot attest to the reason being over a woman ... but I can say for certain that the 'marriage' between the two started to go 'bad' as their popularity amongst young whites during the 'blues revival' of the late 1970s took hold. Young guitarists flocked to Brownie, while wannabe harp players idolized & flocked to Sonny ... due to the attention & adoration he was receiving, Brownie started to feel 'trapped' in his relationship with 'the old man,' as he called Sonny, & he resented the fact that he may/might/could have gotten much further along in music popularity in recent years had he not been with Sonny for so many years. They started to 'drift apart' ... as witnessed by so many, including sad mistreatment of each other off & on stage/publicly, until they eventually stopped performing together altogether. That is my honest testimony as to what I witnessed first-hand regarding their relationship, &, sadly, its demise.

Brownie passed on Feb. 16th, 1996, in Oakland CA. Hard to believe he passed 22 years ago this coming week. I attended his funeral & burial, & have the memorial 'program' as a keepsake. His home in Oakland has been designated a historic site. I prefer to remember them both as seen in this photo below. RIP Brownie McGhee & Sonny Terry.

<<< "Don't know if this is true or not. I was told many years ago while they were still performing together, that the rift was because Sonny felt that Brownie looked upon him as dumb, a stupid person." - Lawrence Cohen >>>

Well, it's a far more complex relationship than that ... here we have two physically challenged men, one near blind, the other a 'cripple' ... the 'cripple leading the blind' from 1942 to 1980, through train & bus stations, airports, subways, street signs, etc. ... for 38 years! ... Sonny's lack of eyesight kept him somewhat illiterate/backwoods in 'schooling', speech, stories, & demeanor, while Brownie was very literate & 'well spoken'/communicative, somewhat well read & very informed ... they experienced great success together in spite of it all for 38 years ... as the blues revival took hold & they each started to garner their own white fans, as I stated in my post ... add this to the fact that they began to be in demand for TV & films ... Brownie could handle acting & script reading, Sonny not so much ... I think Brownie felt later in life that Sonny's debilitation/semi-literacy had denied them opportunities in other media over the many years they were together ... a sense of sour regret for opportunities possibly missed ... not because he considered Sonny dumb /a stupid person ... Brownie knew better than that ... Sonny was 'sharp as a tack', but in a semi-literate backwoods manner, not in a sophisticated urban manner ... later on McGhee appeared in small roles in films and on television. Of course, he and Terry appeared

in the 1979 Steve Martin comedy *The Jerk*. In 1987, McGhee gave a small but memorable performance as the ill-fated blues singer Toots Sweet in the supernatural thriller movie *Angel Heart*. In his review of *Angel Heart*, the critic Roger Ebert singled out McGhee for praise, declaring that he delivered a "performance that proves saxophonist Dexter Gordon isn't the only old musician who can act." McGhee appeared in the television series *Family Ties*, in a 1988 episode entitled "The Blues, Brother", in which he played the fictional blues musician Eddie Dupre. He also appeared in the television series *Matlock*, in a 1989 episode entitled "The Blues Singer". So ... those film/TV opportunities that Brownie experienced after the 'break up' of the duo with Sonny in 1980 could be 'proof' that Brownie's regrets & 'bad feelings' toward Sonny in their latter years together was the result of the differences in their 'literacy' ... even so, Sonny performed a cover of Robert Johnson's "Crossroad Blues" for the 1986 film *Crossroads*, and he died of natural causes in Mineola, New York in March 1986, three days before *Crossroads* was released in theaters. I don't believe Brownie simply thought Sonny was dumb/stupid ... their relationship was far more complex than it appeared to journalists and blues fans. Does that make sense to you?

- Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

