



Harmonica player **Sonny Terry** was one of the initial bluesmen who crossed over into areas not normally associated with the genre before he came along. Along with his partner, guitarist **Brownie McGhee**, **Terry** played on numerous folk recordings with the likes of **Woody Guthrie**, developed an acting career showcased on television and Broadway, and never compromised his unique high-pitched penetrating harmonica style called 'whoopin'.

Sonny Terry was born **Saunders Terrell** on October 24, 1911, in Greensboro, GA. He lost his sight by the time he was 16 in two separate accidents. His father played harmonica in local functions around town and taught **Terry** at an early age. Realizing his eyesight would keep him from pursuing a profession in farming, **Terry** decided instead to be a blues singer. He began traveling to nearby Raleigh and Durham, NC, performing on street corners for tips. In 1934, he befriended the popular guitarist **Blind Boy Fuller**. **Fuller** convinced **Terry** to move to Durham, where the two immediately gained a strong local following. By 1937, they were offered an opportunity to go to New York and record for the Vocalion label. A year later, **Terry** would be back in New York taking part in **John Hammond**'s legendary Spirituals to Swing concert, where he performed one of his memorable tunes, "Mountain Blues." Upon returning to Durham, **Terry** continued playing regularly with **Fuller** and also met his future partner, guitarist **Brownie McGhee**, who would accompany **Terry** off and on for the next two decades. **McGhee** was initially sent to look after **Terry** by **Blind Boy**'s manager, **J.B. Long**. **Long** figured **McGhee** might get a chance to play some of the same shows as **Terry**. A friendship developed between the two men and following **Fuller**'s death in 1941, **Terry** and **McGhee** moved to New York. The change proved fruitful as they immediately found steady work, playing concerts both as a duo and solo. **Terry** became an in-demand session player who started showing up regularly on the records of folk luminaries including **Leadbelly**, **Woody Guthrie**, and **Pete Seeger**. An acting role was also initiated at this time, in the long-running Broadway production of *Finian's Rainbow* in 1946. By the mid-'50s, **Terry** and **McGhee** began broadening their collective horizons and traveled extensively outside of New York. They released a multitude of recordings for labels like Folkways, Savoy, and Fantasy that crossed the boundaries of race, becoming well-known in folk and blues circles performing for black and white audiences. It was also in the mid-50s that **Terry** and **McGhee** accepted roles on Broadway, joining the cast of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, exposing them to an even broader audience. In the early '60s, the duo performed at numerous folk and blues festivals around the world, while **Terry** found time to work with singer **Harry Belafonte** and in television commercials. **Terry** was constantly traveling throughout the '70s, stopping only long enough to write his instructional book, *The Harp Styles of Sonny Terry*. By the mid-'70s, the strain of being on the road developed into personal problems between **McGhee** and **Terry**. Unfortunately, they resigned their long partnership, divided by the bitterness of constant touring. **Terry** was still being discovered by a younger blues generation via the **Johnny Winter**-produced album *Whoopin'* for the Alligator label, featuring **Winter** and **Willie Dixon**. **Winter** had produced a comeback album for **Muddy Waters** (*Hard Again*) that helped rejuvenate his career, and he was attempting the same with **Terry**. By the '80s, **Terry**'s age was catching up with him. He quit recording and only accepted sporadic live appearances. **Terry** passed away in 1986, the year he was inducted into the Blues Foundations Hall of Fame.