



# *Skip James*

By Roi Geyari.

Nehemiah Curtis James was born on June 21, 1902 according to most sources, although some sources suggest that he was born on June 9 of the same year. He was born in Bentonia, a small town in Yazoo County, Mississippi.

Not much is known about the early years of his life. He got the nickname "Skip" or "Skippy" from his friends when he was very young. There are a few speculations of why he got that name. Whether it was because of his strange walking, or maybe because of the fact that he never stayed anywhere for long and often "skipped" from place to place, nobody is quite sure. One thing is certain. He didn't realize at that time that the name "Skip James" will become one of the most legendary and recognizable names in blues history.

He was born to a Christian family. His father left home in 1907 to start a life as a Baptist preacher, and Skip would later follow his footsteps. After every attempt to find Skip's father failed, Skip left home in 1916. A year later he went back to his mother's home in Bentonia and went to high school, where he also got piano lessons from his cousin Alma Williams. Skip dropped out of high school in 1918 or 1919 and started working on road construction and levee-building crews in the early 20's. In the later 20's he also worked as a sharecropper, a bootlegger and even as a pimp. During that time, he wrote his first song, "Illinois Blues", about his time as a laborer. He began playing a cheap guitar in his teens, and fell under the spell of guitarist Henry Stuckey and other local musicians. Henry Stuckey's music has never been recorded, but it is known that he was Skip's number one teacher. He taught Skip how to play in a weird guitar tuning known as "open E minor". They both developed a blues guitar style that would later be known by the name of "Bentonia School of Blues", a style of guitar playing attributed to blues players who make a frequent use of minor chords and mysterious vocal style, a style that is somewhat more sophisticated and complicated. Using that style, Skip would later record some of the most unforgettable blues ever recorded, songs that dramatically effected the music of the likes of Robert Johnson, Eric Clapton, Bonnie Raitt and Lou Reed, and made Skip James a legend. Skip heard Stuckey playing songs like "Drunken Spree" (Perhaps the first song he learned to play) and "All Night Long" and recorded them himself, showing his considerable guitar skills. As a piano player, Skip was heavily influenced by Eurreal Wilford "Little Brother" Montgomery and Leroy Carr, both of them were younger than Skip. It's known that a rare 1927 demo recording by him of a song called "Throw Me Down" exists, in which Skip played the piano, but few people have actually heard that recording, some of them are not even sure that it's Skip.

In February of 1931, Skip James auditioned for the Jackson, Mississippi record shop owner and talent scout Henry C. Speir, who placed blues performers with a variety of record labels. H. C. Speir was responsible for launching the recording careers of some of the greatest Mississippi blues musicians in the 1920s and 1930s, some of those musicians had names like Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Bo Carter and Robert Wilkins. Speir already heard the best voices of the blues. So when Skip James entered the shop for the audition, Speir was not impressed or excited to see another average-looking black guy with a cheap guitar in his hands. But then, Skip began to play. When Speir heard Skip James, he was shocked. He never heard anything like this before. One didn't even have to be a musician to understand that Skip was one of the best guitarists of his time. His style was something else. It was haunting, dark, almost scary. The bizarre tuning of the strings, and the flexibility of his fingers, created a

smooth, clean style that is not the dirty, driving style of other delta-blues musicians like Willie Brown and Charley Patton, but is just as powerful and electrifying. And Skip voice, that high, mysterious falsetto, perfectly matched his guitar playing. Skip immediately won a recording contract with one of the most important record companies of the era, "Paramount Records", and a train ticket to Grafton, Wisconsin, where the recording studio was located.

Though Paramount Records were a very important record label in the age of 78 rpm records, and were responsible for great recordings by the likes of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ma Rainey, Charley Patton and even jazz star Louis Armstrong, they were known by the poor quality of their recordings and their bad treatment for their recording artists. The great depression was on at that time, and the record companies needed money urgently. The money was all they cared about, and when a great artist made enough records, they threw him back into the trash. The artists usually got nothing for their talent.

Art Laibly, the producer for Paramount Records, picked up Skip James from the train station, and drove him to an old chair factory, where the recording facility was located. Skip James was given a beautiful "Stella" guitar, and was more than ready to make his dream come true. Music was Skip's whole world. He knew that he had an amazing gift, and that his music deserved to be heard. There was nothing he wanted more than to become a blues star, and he knew that it's going to be the greatest day of his life.

Skip James started recording. He recorded no less than 18 tracks in that session for Paramount Records. It was clearly more than just an ordinary session. It was a session that gave birth to some of the most amazing blues anyone has ever heard. And Skip wrote most of the songs himself. He was a very talented songwriter, his lyrics were very personal, very intimate, mostly about love problems.

One of the songs Skip recorded that day was "Devil Got My Woman". Skip wrote it just shortly before his brief marriage life was ended. Skip was married to a young daughter of a preacher, and he suffered a nervous break-down when he found out that she was cheating on him with his friend. The first repeated line of that song, "I would rather be the Devil than to be that woman's man", was unbearable, and it was definitely not the norm for a Christian to say something like that at that time. Just the thought of what that woman did to him was painful, and the way that that Skip delivered that line, along with other lines such as "It was nothing but the Devil that changed my baby's mind" was burned in the memory of every blues fan forever. This song was clearly the basis of Robert Johnson's masterpiece "Hellhound on My Trail", and was covered by Bonnie Raitt, Alvin Youngblood Heart and Paul Geremia among others. It became Skip's signature song and it's often described as Skip's greatest recording.

The song "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" was a chilling, unique and sadly precise way of describing the great depression, that affected everybody's life, but harmed black people the most:

*Hard time is here and everywhere you go  
Times is harder than ever been before  
And the people are driftin' from door to door  
Can't find no heaven, I don't care where they go  
Let me tell you people, just before I go  
These hard times will kill you just dry long so  
Well, you hear me singin' my lonesome song  
These hard times can last us so very long  
If I ever get off this killin' floor  
I'll never get down this low no more*

Like almost every blues musician of that era, Skip James was also a great gospel singer. Almost every bluesman of that era had to deal with the struggle between sacred music and secular music. The blues at that time was considered the "Devil's music" because of its frequent hellish references to subjects like sex, alcohol, death and, of course, the Devil, hell, voodoo, ect. If a black man started playing the blues, that meant that the Devil has claimed his soul, and that he already earned his ticket to hell. There are those who decided in the end to record only blues, Robert Johnson is a good example. There are those who succeeded in getting away from the sinful ways of the blues and recorded only religious songs, like Blind Willie Johnson. But there are those who couldn't help but combining the Devil's music with God's music, and in a lot of cases they felt a little regret about it for the rest of their lives. But for some reason it seemed like Skip James felt more comfortable about this combination than others.

Skip James recorded two religious songs in that session. One of them, "Let Jesus Lead You", was already recorded by blues-gospel singer Reverend Edward W. Clayborn. Skip recorded it under the title "Jesus is a Mighty Good Leader":

*Let Jesus lead you, let Jesus lead you  
Let Jesus lead you, all the way  
All the way from earth to heaven  
Let Jesus lead you, all the way*

Skip also recorded the traditional "Be Ready When He Comes":

*Jesus is coming to this world again  
Coming to judge the hearts of men  
Don't let him catch your heart filled with sins  
He's coming again someday  
Be ready when he comes...*

The session became one of the most legendary and accomplished sessions in the history of the blues. But it was not the end.

On the next day of February, 1931, Skip James recorded another 8 tracks. This time, on the piano. Skip was a great, unique piano player. He had his own style, he played by his own rules, and under his own terms. He didn't sound like anybody else on the piano. He had a very strange piano style, in a good way. When he played the piano he took the word "rhythm" only as a recommendation. He pressed the keys only when he felt like it and sang only when he felt like doing that. He could start a song in a slow rhythm, and later add up-tempoed melodies that were followed by an improvised foot stomping. Nobody played like that. Only Skip.

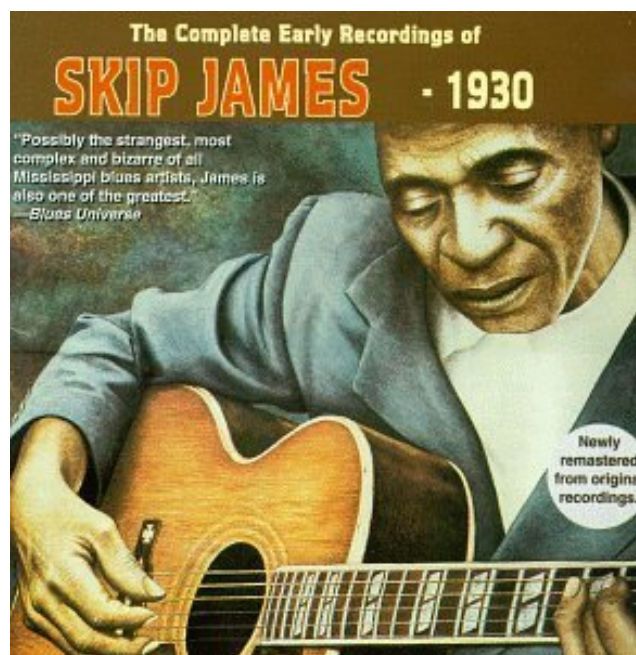
The most famous song he played on the piano is ".22-20 Blues":

*If I send for my baby and she don't come  
If I send for my baby and she don't come  
All the doctors in Wisconsin, they won't help her none*

*And if she gets unruly and gets so she don't wanna do  
My baby gets unruly and she don't wanna do  
I'll take my .22-20, I'll cut her half in two*

*You're talkin' about your .44-40, buddy, it'll do very well  
Talkin' about your .44-40, it'll do very well  
But my .22-20, Lord, it's a burnin' hell*

*I had a .38 Special, buddy, it's most too light  
Aw, that .38 Special, buddy, it's most too light  
But my .22-20 make the caps alright*



Out of all of Skip James' 26 recordings, only 18 were released, and in very small numbers. Skip never saw a penny in exchange for his amazing recordings. Record sales dropped during the great depression. The radio started playing music for free. Paramount Records bankrupted. Skip James' records gained a huge failure, and his dream faded.

Skip never felt so desperate and hopeless in his life. He felt the most painful feeling any musician can ever feel: That the music he played was worthless, and the recordings he made were in vain.

Skip could find no gigs, and nobody was interested in what he had to offer musically. He took it to mean that it was maybe a sign from God, and he left his blues career behind to start a new, Christian life.

Skip James became a Baptist minister, just like his father. He was willing to do anything to wash away his sins, as he saw it. He learned from his "mistake", and sang only gospel from then on. He formed his own gospel group, and drifted in and out of music.

Skip James just vanished after the Paramount session in February of 1931. The details about where he lived, what he did, or how close he was to the music world, are surrounded by mystery to this day. Nobody is sure if he even heard his own recordings. It's known that he went to work in a lumber camp, and to a seminary school but didn't graduate. He met his father, perhaps in 1932, and stayed with him until the death of his mother in the 50's. He traveled with his gospel group throughout the United States. Other than that, nothing is known about his times after the Paramount session. Skip James was gone.

After Skip James disappeared, his name became a legend. His rare recordings were like a treasure for blues collectors. His influences started to appear in the music of the likes of Muddy Waters, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup and Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins. early blues legends such as Johnnie Temple and, most importantly, Robert Johnson started covering his songs. But Skip himself? It's more than likely that he had no idea about what was happening in the area that just a few years earlier was the closest thing to him. Skip completely cut his connection with the blues world, and didn't let nobody and nothing get in his way to become a born-again Christian.

In the early 40's, the blues started becoming electric. The Texas-born Aaron "T-Bone" Walker started drawing inspiration from jazz guitarists such as Django Reinhardt and Charlie Christian, who had already played the electric guitar, and started using this guitar for blues playing. He created a whole new style, and it was followed by B.B King, Lowell Fulson and others. Bluesmen from the Delta such as Muddy Waters, Elmore James and Howlin' Wolf went up to Chicago to get rid of the long, hard work in the cotton fields and improve the quality of their lives in the big city. When the electric guitar took control of the blues world, they immediately took this guitar in their hands, used it for playing the blues that they brought straight from the delta, formed their bands, and created the rough, raw, dirty and beautiful style called the "Chicago Blues". This was perhaps the most popular blues style at that time. This music came from the Delta, but the real, traditional, delta blues was forgotten.

Until, in 1959, American music historian Samuel Charters, started his writing career when he published a book called "The Country Blues". A little interest in rural country-blues artists was starting to show, and in a perfect timing. This was the time of the folk revival of the 1960's, and the "Newport Folk Festival" in Newport, Rhode Island. 18,000 people came to those concerts on a regular basis to watch historic musical moments such as the begging of the career of a young lady named Joan Baez, or Bob Dylan switching to the electric guitar.

A lot of important things happened at the Newport Folk Festival. One of them, and perhaps the most exciting one, was the "rediscovery" of old, forgotten country blues musicians. When Sam Charters released his book, he started a whole movement of blues enthusiasts, who were fans of musicians like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, and started to wonder what the origins of that music are. Those blues fans began traveling throughout the South to look for lost country blues musicians, and to bring them to a whole new, mostly white audience.

Mississippi John Hurt was a bluesman and a songster from Avalon, Mississippi. He recorded for the label "Okeh Records" in 1928 and became one of the most influential folk guitarists of his time. After the Okeh session he quit recording and was rediscovered in 1963 by Tom Hoskins, who brought him to Newport. In one of his 1928 songs, "Avalon Blues", Mississippi John Hurt sang "Avalon my hometown, always on my mind", and Hoskins, who was very inspired by those recordings, actually used this song as a map to locate John Hurt. Hurt was one of the biggest successes of the Newport Folk Festival.

Exactly one year later, Eddie James House Jr., better known as Son House, was rediscovered as well. Son House recorded for Paramount Records in 1930. He vanished for eleven years, and in 1941 he recorded for Alan Lomax from the Library of Congress. He faded again, until he was rediscovered in Rochester, New York, where he lived since 1943.



Mississippi John Hurt (left) and Son House. This photo was taken by Dick Waterman in 1964. Hurt and House never met each other before the 60's, and they became good friends after their rediscovery.

As amazing as it may sound, at the very same day that Son House was rediscovered, three blues fans, John Fahey, Bill Barth and Henry Vastine, found Nehemiah "Skip" James in a hospital in Tunica, Mississippi. Skip James was battling cancer, and needed an urgent surgery. The people who rediscovered Skip succeeded in convincing him to perform at the Newport Folk Festival. They had to teach Skip how to play the guitar all over again, since Skip hadn't touched a guitar for maybe 33 years. John Fahey and his group memorized Skip's techniques from his 1931 session for Paramount Records, and taught him how to play like Skip James again. Skip also had to listen to his own recordings, maybe for the very first time, to remember the lyrics to his own songs. Skip's motivation was definitely not musical, only financial. He was a poor, sick, old man and there was nothing he needed more than the money for his operation.

In July 1964, Son House was supposed to get on the stage in the Newport Folk Festival, but he got too drunk. Somebody had to replace him, and Skip James was chosen in the last moment. Skip had never been so nervous. And he had a good reason. He was about to play for an audience of maybe 17 or 18 thousand people. Those were people who never heard about Skip, white people, and there was a big chance that they wouldn't accept Skip's disturbing voice and guitar sound.

A young man named Dick Waterman was a writer at that time. He was so moved by the country blues revival of the 60's, that he quit his writing career and established the Northeast's first ever blues booking agency. He became a manager for some of the greatest bluesmen of that time: Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, Bukka White, Mississippi Fred McDowell, just to name a few.

Waterman was also an important photographer, and he took some of the most unforgettable photos of the festival. One of those photos shows Skip James just seconds before he went on stage for the first time, in that very special day of July 1964.





Mississippi John Hurt (left) and Skip James. Every musician was wearing a rectangular badge that said "KIN", which meant that he is a performer or a staff member.

In that picture, Skip James is tuning his guitar, getting ready to go on stage. The big moment finally arrived. Skip James went on stage and looked at the biggest group of people he had ever seen. For the audience it was just another artist going to play for them. But Dick Waterman, who heard Skip's early recordings, already felt like he is a witness of a historical moment. And he wanted to use his gift as a photographer to capture that moment. He wanted to take a picture of Skip James' very first note, chord, word, or verse of that concert. Skip James plucked the guitar, and moaned a big "I". The "I" of "I would rather be Devil, than to be that woman's man".



This is the picture of the precise first note of Skip James' rediscovery. And it's still one of the most famous pictures in blues history.

Skip started the song only with the line "I would rather be the Devil". When he sang that line, everybody became mute. The audience had no idea how to react. Everybody got quiet, so quiet, just to listen to Skip. After Skip sang that line, he played a short, haunting lick on his guitar, and then he burst that scary silence with a big B Minor chord, and finished his line with a much louder voice, "I would rather be the devil, than to be that woman's man". After that line, Skip got the biggest, warmest applause he has ever heard in his life.

Skip was an immediate hit, and he was about to start a new career, from the best starting point anyone could possibly imagine.



Skip James and his mesmerized audience, Newport 1964. Photo by Dick Waterman.

But Skip's good luck didn't last long.

Skip's cousin, Fred Bolden, told me about Skip's relationship with the people who rediscovered him, and about Skip's decision to start working with Dick Waterman:

**"The relationship that Skip had with the people who re-discovered him was not good. Skip found out that they were using his money for personal expenses. Now Roi, Skip did talk about that. The three men who fell out of favor with Skip were John Fahey, Henry Vestine (who later played with Canned Heat), and Ed Denson. At some point, Skip met and talked with Waterman. He found that Dick Waterman was fair, made sure the money was good, always gave you the money, and you never had to worry about getting paid. Dick and Skip got along well because of that."**

So 1964 was a lost opportunity for Skip James. The people who were supposed to manage Skip's career were unconfident about what they were doing, and Skip didn't get a recording contract. Skip had a chance to become a huge seller after he became such a big hit at Newport '64, and since that didn't happen, people started forgetting about him again, and his musical motivation was wasted.

Still, after Skip started working with Dick Waterman, he had some great recording sessions. Most of the songs he recorded were remakes of his own songs from the 1931 session for Paramount Records, but he also recorded some new songs. Some traditional, some he wrote himself.



Left to right: Son House, Skip James and Mississippi John Hurt. It was taken by Dick Waterman in Newport 1965.

People who will look at this photo might get the impression that Skip James was a sweet, friendly man. But they would be wrong.

Skip James is remembered by everybody who knew him as a hard, angry, bitter man. Dick Waterman told me:

**"He was a difficult man, did not listen to other bluesmen of his time, did not communicate with his audience very well and was very vain with a huge affection for himself . . ."**

Fred Bolden:

**"Skip had a very complex personality, and if you weren't careful, you were liable to get your feelings hurt. God help you if you didn't know a bible verse at the table before dinner. Skip would tear you to shreds, lecture you, then ask you what kind of upbringing you had."**

Fred Bolden is a retired police officer from Boston, Massachusetts. He was thrilled to discover in the 1960's that Skip James married his mom's first cousin, Lorenzo Hurt. Lorenzo was the daughter of Hennis Hurt, Mississippi John Hurt's brother. Mississippi John Hurt was the brother of Fred's grandfather. Skip wrote the song "Lorenzo Blues" about his wife.

Fred told Angela K. Mack, a musician, a writer and co-founder of the official website of Paramount Records, what he remembers about Lorenzo:

**"Lorenzo stuck with him all the way. If you asked him, he said, "She's shaped like a Coca Cola bottle and she wobbles and she wobbles when she walks." Those are lines from a song of his. Very heavy. Not fat. A large woman, Very kind, thoughtful, and supportive. They have a beautiful grave site. She was religious. I don't know what church."**

**"Skip and Lorenzo had an adopted son named Bobby. I didn't get along too good with him. He was a homosexual and he tried to hit on me, right there in Skip's house. I haven't seen Bobby since 1969 or 1970."**

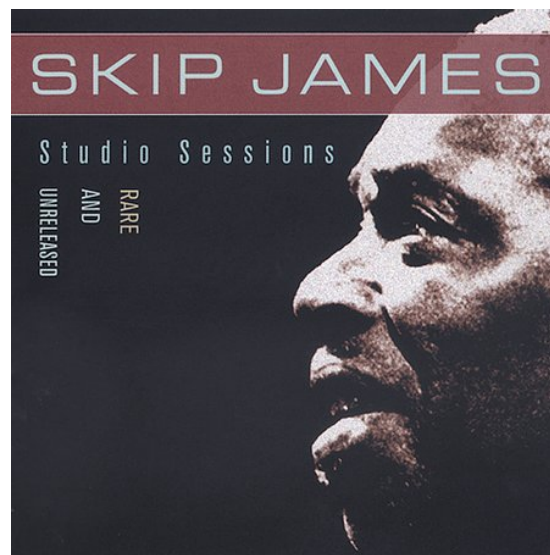
Fred also told me about Skip's relationships with other musicians:

**"Skip got along very well with my uncle John, but privately I don't think John particularly liked Skip's caustic ways. Skip got along fabulously with Reverend Robert Wilkins and they liked each other. Before Skip went onstage at Newport 1964, I can remember Skip was so nervous that he was shaking. I remember that Rev. Wilkins put his arm around Skip and tried to calm him down. After that, man, when Skip got out there, he was an instant hit."**

Fred remembers that Skip was decisive to "do his own thing", not to play other people's songs, and develop a style that would be as much complex and sophisticated as he can so other people wouldn't be able to copy him:

**"Skip never liked it when anybody did his songs, moreover, he didn't like performing others' material as well. I found that out the hard way when I asked him to do, "See, See, Rider". I mean, so what if that song was associated with John Hurt? It was a traditional song and I'd heard it performed by many artists. Hey, that's the way Skip was. Since I knew what he was about, I learned to stay on his good side and we got along."**

Still, Skip did cover songs by other musicians, perhaps because of lack of choices. His certainly wasn't as creative as he was in the 30's (As stated, most of his 60's recordings are remakes of songs from his session for Paramount Records), but he just had to make records. Another speculation is that he had only problem to have common material with people that he knew, people he shared the stage with, such as Son House and Mississippi John Hurt. All of Skip covers were of songs by early bluesmen that were still very little known at that time. Among Skip's covers in the 60's were Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Jack O' Diamonds" and Leroy Carr's "How Long Blues". Skip's versions were magical.



This is the cover of an album that contains recordings that were released only in 2003. Almost none of the songs in that album were written by Skip himself, and most of them are traditional gospel songs.

Fred remembers Skip's live shows:

**"As for Skip's live shows, the first one I saw was very enthusiastically received. That was Newport 1964. After Skip moved to Philadelphia, that wasn't often the case. See, he used to play regularly at the Second Fret Coffeehouse. There, Skip used to do more talking than playing, lecturing his audience, and trying to be more educated than he really was. That turned a lot of people off, so they stopped coming to see Skip. Sometime when I went down there, you might only see five or six people in the club who actually came to hear Skip. So, he alienated a lot of people."**

Skip had cancer in his testicles, and his testicles were removed, which made Skip's voice two times higher than it was in the 30's. As time passed, his surgery became more and more urgent, but Skip just didn't have money for it.

A brand new musical genre, today known as British blues-rock, was developed in England in the early 60's. One of the most famous bands that used that music form at that time was Cream. Cream's leader, Eric Clapton, was a huge blues fan, and one of the artists he admired was Skip James. Cream recorded a rock version of Skip's song "I'm So Glad" for their first album "Fresh Cream" in 1966. Skip got a chance to listen to the record, and he despised it of course, but the success of that cover paid for the hospital bills. Skip was operated successfully and went back to recording.

Eric Clapton wanted to give Skip something back, and he bought him and his wife, Lorenzo, a beautiful house in Philadelphia. Fred Bolden remembers:

**"I spent many Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays right in Skip's home. The James's actually gave me their bedroom to sleep in, and I can still remember the old fashioned furniture it contained and a notebook on the night table where Skip had written his songs in lead pencil. This room was upstairs and not in use, since Skip was very sick at the time, they made quarters for him to sleep downstairs."**



The "Fresh Cream" album cover.

Skip James recorded numerous albums in the 60's. Because of his small material, a lot of times he recorded the same song on two different albums.

Skip's guitar style was very different. Skip's guitar playing in the 60's was not as virtuosic as it was in the 30's, and in some recordings it even sounds a little sloppy and immature. In recordings such as rendition of "Catfish Blues", however, his guitar work is tremendous. Skip didn't lose the magic he had in his fingers, but one can really tell in which of his sessions he enjoyed playing, and in which of his sessions he played because "he had to". His piano playing remained pretty much the same, as he spent a lot of time in church after he vanished, and probably had time to practice. But it's more than likely that he didn't touch a guitar.

Dick Waterman told film director Wim Wenders:

**"I was listening to some of his 60's stuff, and his fingers are really flying, in other words he has great dexterity. Just barely brushing the strings, picking very fast, but very clean... Picking fast and clean... Considering... I don't even know if he played from the 30's until the 60's, I don't know... It's very possible that he didn't own a guitar, and didn't play very much, and when he was found in Tunica he was very very rusty and hadn't play very much... But by the mid 1960's he was playing extraordinarily well."** (From the movie "Soul of a Man").

Skip recorded very few new original songs in the 60's. Besides of his old songs, his material contained a wide variety of traditional folk songs, mostly religious songs, but also songs such as "Careless Love", "Black Gal", "Catfish Blues" and others.

Skip's new originals are interesting. He wrote about immigration, about poverty, about death. Skip also didn't stop writing songs about women. He even wrote a sweet, romantic love song called "She's All the World to me".

*She got two little eyes that shine so bright  
Two little arms that would caress me so tight  
An two little lips that will kiss me, goodnight  
An she's still that little girl of mine*

That was a whole new Skip James.  
"Lorenzo Blues" was written by Skip about his wife:

*She's stuttered in her speech  
An she wiggle an a-wobble when she walk  
She got three gold teeth  
And she got deep dimples in her jaw*

*If I can make a half a million  
I'm gonna give it all to the hoodoo man  
Just after he promise me that he will  
Bring my lovin' Lorenzo, back home to me, again*

Two of those songs were influenced by Skip's poor health - "Sick Bed Blues" and "Washington D.C. Hospital Center Blues".

In "Sick Bed Blues" he sang:

*Layin' sick, honey, on my bed  
I used to have some friends but they wish that I were dead  
The doctor came, lookin' very sad  
He diagnosed my case and said it was awful bad  
He walked away, mumblin' very low  
He said, "He may get better but he'll never get well no more*

"Washington D.C. Hospital Center Blues" is a fascinating song about Skip's time in the hospital, and about the doctors' treatment.

*In the hospital, in Washington D.C.  
Ain't got nobody to see about me  
But I was a good man  
and I was a poor man  
You can understand*

*All of the doctors, and nurses too  
They came and they asked me  
'Who in the world are you?'  
I says, I'm the good man  
But I'm a poor man  
You can understand*

*The doctors and nurses  
They shakin' their head  
Said, 'Take this po' man  
And put him to bed'  
Because he's a good man  
We know he's a poor man  
We can understand*

*The doctors and nurses  
They shakin' my hand  
Say, 'You can go home now, Skip  
You's a sound, well man'  
Because you's a good man  
You's a poor man  
We can understand*

*I'd taken my doctor  
And I was shakin' his hand  
I'm gonna play these hospital blues  
'Till I'm a healthy man'  
I was a good man  
and I was a poor man  
You could understand*



When Skip James died in Philadelphia in October 3, 1969, the line "He may get better but he'll never get well no more" from "Sick Bed Blues" became even more tragic. The surgery didn't cure Skip, it gave him only three more years to live.

Skip's life is a one sad story. Skip had a chance to become a great star in the early 30's, but he missed the opportunity. Not because of anything related to his music, but because of money issues, and he is definitely not the only musician that it happened to him. In the 60's he had the same chance, and the same thing happened again. The music he recorded in the 60's is music of a poor, bitter, sad man who had nobody in the world to trust. But it was such beautiful music. Skip James didn't get the chance to realize how influential he became. Musicians such as Jimmy Holmes and the late Jack Owens continued the "Bentonia School of Blues" tradition that was made famous by their hero, and even rock artists such as Beck and the John Spencer Blues Explosion refers to Skip's music as a big influence. Skip James had a great gift and a great talent. His talent was not completely wasted, Skip recorded amazing music, but it was not used properly. He had much more to offer, and his life was ended in a sad, grating way. He will be remembered forever, and his music will never die. It's too powerful to be forgotten.



I would like to thank Fred Bolden, Dick Waterman, Angela Mack and Tommer Levin for their help.



