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A Blues Life (Music in American Life)

Henry Townsend

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Henry Townsend, who first arrived in St. Louis and began playing guitar in the mid- 1920s, was an integral part of the St. Louis blues scene during its formative years. Three-quarters of a century later, Townsend is the last remaining link to the early blues world of St. Louis. This enchanting oral history recounts Townsend's early days as a shoeshiner fronting for a bootlegging operation, his passion for the guitar ('the sound of that guitar just went through me, just penetrated me like a bullet'), and his collaborations and friendships with many of the musicians and entrepreneurs who shaped the blues scene in St. Louis. Through Townsend's easy reminiscences, the guitarist Lonnie Johnson, the pianists Walter Davis and Roosevelt Sykes, and the promoter Jessie Johnson come vividly to life, along with scores of other individuals both remembered and forgotten who left their mark on a key musical genre.Touching on important social aspects of St. Louis life, from racism and police harassment to honky-tonk speakeasies, "A Blues Life" offers a personal and often moving commentary on music and culture in the city. Townsend recounts that in the 1920s, St. Louis' Booker T. Washington Theater brought in famous acts like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Peg Leg Bates, but very few local blues artists ever appeared there. While middle-class blacks regarded jazz as on the border of respectability, the blues were far over the line, and especially the raw, 'gut bucket style blues' that he says set St. Louis blues apart from the styles developing in Chicago, Kansas City, and Mississippi. A living legend, Townsend is still active as a performer and a recording artist. His story is a priceless first-hand account of a world long gone, even as his music-making continues to influence a new generation of St. Louis blues artists.

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