

## Canned Heat Blues

Written by bluesever

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## Canned Heat Blues

**Canned Heat:** Slang term for Sterno, a commercial jellied alcohol used to heat food, typically placed beneath metal pans on a banquet or buffet line. "Canned Heat" referred to any one of a number of concoctions based on alcohol found in shoe polish, cooking fuel, etc. Early Mississippi Delta bluesman **Tommy Johnson** is said to have drunk "canned heat," and wrote his song "Canned Heat Blues" about the nasty stuff.

## Canned Heat Blues

Johnson wails his sorrow of alcohol addiction, taken to the extreme of drinking Sterno, strained through bread, in the mistaken belief that somehow made it safe to drink. Sadly, of course, he was wrong, and his later work rapidly deteriorated as his health predictably declined from his excesses.



## Tommy Johnson

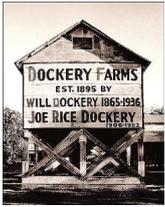
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Tommy Johnson was born in 1896 in Hinds County, MS, on the George Miller plantation. He learned to play the guitar and, by 1914, was supplementing his income by playing at local parties with his brothers Major and LeDell. In 1916 he married and moved to Webb Jennings' Plantation near Drew, close to famous Dockery Plantation. There he met other musicians including Charlie Patton and Willie Brown.



## Dockery Plantation

By 1920 he had become an alcoholic and itinerant musician traveling widely around the South, sometimes accompanied by Papa Charlie McCoy. In 1928 he made his first recordings with McCoy for Victor Records. "**Canned Heat Blues**" was recorded on August 31, 1928 in Memphis, Tennessee.



Sterno Canned Heat

## Sterno (Canned Heat)

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Johnson's first releases hit the area hard, inspiring a raft of up-and-comers that reads like the proverbial who's who list. He cut one more stack of great records for the Paramount label in 1930, largely through the maneuvering of fellow drinking buddy Charley Patton.



### Tommy Johnson - Canned Heat Blues, single

He did not record again, mistakenly believing that he had signed away his right to record. This resulted in a legal settlement with The Mississippi Sheiks who had used Johnson's *"Big Road Blues"*

melody in their successful

*"Stop and Listen"*.

Johnson was party to the copyright settlement, but was too drunk at the time to understand what he had signed to.

Johnson remained a popular performer in the Jackson area through the 1930s and 1940s. The one-too-many-nights of Sterno and shoe polish buzzes reducing his once prodigious talents to small, sporadic flickerings of former genius. He worked on a medicine show with Ishmon Bracey in the '30s, but mostly seemed to be a mainstay of the juke and small-party dance circuit for the rest of his days. He died of a heart attack after playing at a party in 1956.

