

## Fortescue, John Henry: Guitar Shorty <sup>[1]</sup>



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### John Henry Fortescue: Becoming Guitar Shorty

by the North Carolina Arts Council.

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#### Jan. 1923-1976

In the early 1970s, a one-of-a-kind artist lived near Elm City—the blues guitarist, singer, and musical storyteller John Henry Fortescue. Known as Guitar Shorty, Fortescue—who was originally from Belhaven, also the hometown of Little Eva of “Loco-Motion” fame—was a small man who played a big guitar spangled with flower decals. The performances he recorded in his brief life are inventive—sincere and comic, sacred and bawdy—sometimes all at the same time. His music is so hard to classify that were he living today, he might be identified first as a performance artist, and then a blues musician.

He had an assertive style that was heavy on boogie beats, and often used a bottleneck slide. Some of his recorded performances were on-the-spot improvisations, elaborate stories supported by his guitar backup in much the same way a soundtrack supports the plot of a movie. Shorty’s song-stories sometimes incorporate conversations between two and three characters—including himself, his mother, his wife, a determined would-be girlfriend, animals, and FBI agents. He performed all the voices, in addition to singing, whistling, imitating harmonica lines, and producing sound effects.

In the fall of 1972, Guitar Shorty recorded an improvisation loosely built around the gospel song “Near the Cross.” In between sung verses he recounted a conversation with his mother, all the while continuing to vamp the tune on guitar:

One thing I was thinking about I was sitting on my mother’s knee, and I was small.

“Son,” she said, “Son, when you grow up, be a grown man, You’re going to learn to play the guitar.”

I said, “Mama, I sure would appreciate that.”

She said, “The Lord will be with you when you start to learning.” She said, “And you know what they’re going to call you?”

I said, “What, Mama?”

“They’re going to call you Guitar Shorty.”

I said, “Mama, thank Jesus.”

“Because you ain’t going to work nohow. You ain’t going to do nothing but play that guitar, Make you a living.”

I said, “Thank you, Mama.”

“If you ever get with somebody that like your music, Honey, you won’t have to work nowhere, On nobody’s farm.”

I said, “Now you told the truth.”

“Because when you’re working on somebody’s farm, You ain’t making a plug nickel.”

I said, “You ain’t lying.”

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For image and more information, please view "[Guitar Shorty: An Appreciation and Memory by Valerie Wilmer](#) <sup>[2]</sup>."

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**Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina :**

Note: This artist should not be confused with David William Kearney, a.k.a. Guitar Shorty, a blues guitarist from Texas.

#### References

Bryan, Sarah, Beverly Bush Patterson, Michelle Lanier, and Titus Brooks Heagins. *African American Music Trails of*

*Eastern North Carolina.* (China, 2013), p. 87.

**Subjects:**

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