

Lightnin' Hopkins

Rare Performances

1960-1979



PO' LIGHTNIN':

AN APPRECIATION

by Mark Humphrey



New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 1974

Photo by Michael P. Smith

*I was born March the 15th,
Man, the year was 19 an' 12.
Yes, you know ever since that day
Po' Lightnin' ain't been doin' so well.
— Lightnin' Hopkins, "Goin' Back and Talk to Mama"*

The year of Sam Hopkins's birth saw the publication of the earliest blues on sheet music, including Hart Wand's *The Dallas Blues*. Legend has it, too, that Blind Lemon Jefferson embarked on his musical wanderings through the country towns south of Dallas and bordered by the Brazos and Trinity Rivers at about the same time. 1912, then, was a banner year for Texas blues. It may be the time celebrated when Lemon sang: "Blues come to Texas, lopin' like a mule."

Lightnin' Hopkins lived the blues but had little use for mules. "Plowing that mule for six bits a day," he would recall ruefully. "That wasn't in store for me." What the future held for Sam Hopkins could have been little guessed by anyone in Centerville, Texas in the Spring of 1912. Nearly seventy years later, Lightnin's death was mourned worldwide as the passing of a major figure in American music. Passing with him was much of a tradition he wrested from men like Jefferson and embellished with his own sharp

wit and implacable personality. Lightnin's uniqueness made him a formidable presence in life. Sadly, it also rendered him a tradition without heirs.

No one came along to extend and elaborate on Lightnin's idiosyncrasies in the way he had Jefferson's, but that's not to say he wasn't influential. Most of the Texas-born blues singer/guitarists of the post-War era—men like Freddie King and Albert Collins—point to him as an seminal influence. Watch Freddie King play on other Vestapol videos and watch Lightnin' here: Though the results are markedly different, both use what might be called 'the Texas pinch,' a heavy thumb-forefinger interaction that characterizes the picking of most Texas bluesmen. But the younger men of necessity took Lightnin's lessons onto bandstands and into performance situations that demanded strict meter and a uniformity at which Lightnin' balked. Though he would be christened 'King of Dowling Street' and live much of his life in urban Houston, Lightnin' would always play 'country,' if we use that adjective to suggest a ragged soulfulness that proudly scorned being 'fenced in' by musical convention. Lightnin' played as he felt and for all his vaunted jiving, never played a note he didn't really mean.

His legacy? Over 600 recorded performances. Les Blank's documentary film, *The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins*. A novel he evidently inspired, Jane Phillips's *Mojo Hand*. And performances like those on this video. Even if he left no musical heirs, Lightnin' made sure the world remembered he'd passed through. More than a decade since his death, his remains one of the most recognized blues names, a still-potent synonym for Texas country blues.

"When I play a guitar," Lightnin' said in Les Blank's *The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins*, "I play it from my heart and soul...The blues is something that the people can't get rid of. And if you ever have the blues, remember what I tell you. You're gonna hear this in your heart..." Hear what? A sharply tremulous riff, a kind of auditory shudder, followed by a blues sung in a voice Jane Phillips called "slowly rough and delicately brutal, like stones being rattled in a can of ribbon cane syrup." Lightnin' lived those country blues, a musical art both intimate and exuberant, evocative of hard lives from which a few men wrested powerful bittersweet poetry. They were men we



Photo by Samuel Charters - Houston, 1974

once pictured hunkered over cheap guitars on back porches or in dim-lit bars, isolated and brooding as they sang to console themselves as much as to anyone else. (Such a figure was portrayed on the cover of the influential 1961 Columbia album, *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers*.) From the moment of his rediscovery in 1959, Lightnin' became, for many of us, the living archetype of this music. As much as anyone we would see during the 1960s blues revival, he embodied the part.

Lightnin' had breathed the blues idiom since childhood. "I had the one thing you need to be a blues singer," he once said. "I was born with the blues." Lightnin' was inspired by early encounters with two giants of early recorded Texas blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Alger 'Texas' Alexander, a distant cousin. In mythically perfect fashion Lightnin' left home early to hobo across Texas, served time on a chain gang (and earned the scars to prove it), experienced the indentured servitude of sharecropping and spent much of his adult life hustling tips with his songs in Houston bars, street corners, even on buses. Drawing from a deep well of commonplace verses augmented by a quick wit for creating fresh ones, Lightnin' entertained the community around Houston's Dowling Street with songs that reflected their common experience. 'Po' Lightnin', as he called himself in song, became the black Houstonian Everyman. His endless stream of autobiographical songs

presented Po' Lightnin's troubles, joys and spur-of-the-moment observations on everything from natural disasters (*Hurricane Beulah* on this video) to astronauts (the 1962 Bluesville recording, *Happy Blues for John Glenn*). "Lightnin' Hopkins can turn the beam of his perception on a sudden incident," wrote Paul Oliver in *Conversation with the Blues*, "an immediate phenomenon and highlight it in a spontaneously created blues."

His reputation spread nationally via recordings and radio exposure in the early 1950s. A decade later he was playing Carnegie Hall and being hailed as "the last great blues singer." If not that, Lightnin' was surely one of the last to display firsthand the imprint of such rustic masters as Jefferson and Alexander. His raw poetic gift was tireless and his facile guitar lines much-copied by white admirers who saw him play endless national (and on rare occasions, international) tours during the last twenty-some years of his life. His deeply personal music not only reflected the experiences of himself and his community but touched a universal nerve. Chris Strachwitz, who often recorded Lightnin', has called his records "brief audio snapshots of one of the great folk poets to emerge from the African-American experience in Texas."

That experience was noted for its brutal cycle of grueling labor rewarded by grim impoverishment. Music offered a rare release from it. "I've been a poor man all my days," Lightnin' relates between songs on this video. "I never was born with a dime, nothin'. But I got to hustlin' and I learned how to knock up on a little change." His hustle was blues and the guitar. Lightnin's first, Jas Obrecht wrote in a 1982 *Guitar Player* eulogy, was homemade at age seven from "a cigar box, a plank and chicken wire..." He picked up the rudiments of guitar from his older brother, Joel and was already playing competently at age eight when he first met Lemon Jefferson at a Baptist picnic near Buffalo, Texas. Lightnin' vividly recalled the encounter some 40 years later for Samuel Charters:

"He had a crowd of people around him and I was standing there looking at him play and I just went to playing [on] my guitar just what he was playing. So he say, 'Who's that playing that guitar?' So they say, 'Oh, that's just a little boy here knocking on the guitar.' He says, 'No, he's playing that guitar,' says, 'Where he at? Come here, boy.'



And I went on over there where he was and he's feeling for me and I was so low he reached down and says, 'This here is what was picking that guitar?' They say, 'Yeah.' So he said, 'Do that again.' So I did the little note again, the same one he

done. He said, 'Well, that's my note,' says, 'that's the same thing. Boy, you keep that up you gonna be a good guitar player.' So he went on and commenced to playing; so I went on to playing with him. I was so little and low the peoples couldn't see me and we was standing by a truck. They put me up on top of the truck and Blind Lemon was standing down by the truck. And me and him, man, we carried it on..." - *Lightnin' Hopkins quoted in The Bluesmen by Samuel Charters, Oak Publications, New York, 1967.*

Following the example of another older brother, John Henry, Sam dropped out of school to hobo through Texas and would again cross paths with Jefferson. "I usta play with Blind Lemon down in Deep Ellum," he told me in 1980. "There ain't no Deep Ellum no more." Deep Ellum was Dallas' version of Storyville, a central Texas red light district where prostitutes and blues singers plied their trades. Both Leadbelly and the white Shelton Brothers memorialized it in song:

*When you go down in Deep Ellum
Keep your money in your pants
'Cause the redheads in Deep Ellum
Never give a man a chance.*

- Shelton Brothers, "Deep Elem [sic] Blues," 1935

By the time Sam Hopkins was in his twenties, he was working a self-made circuit "between Dowling Street and West Dallas" with stops along the way at such small towns as Crockett, Brenham, Buffalo and Palestine. If a friend was going on a trip, Sam might ride in the relative luxury of a "an old T-model truck." Sometimes bus drivers who liked his music offered a lift. And on occasion he simply hopped freights. "Had to wait my time to get on those freight

trains,” he told Paul Oliver in *Conversation with the Blues*. “Other boys, they’d run, swing on them things. I couldn’t do that. See, I always take my guitar with me; I’m scared I’m gonna bust it. So when it was standin’ still I’d slip in the box car and ride.”

“I just go from place to place playin’ music for the dances,” Sam told Oliver. Reeling off names of forgotten Texas farms with sizable black work crews, he added, “every one of those farms gave Friday and Saturday night dances...All you had to do was to rap on your guitar and they’d pat and holler. Ol’ sister would shout, ‘You swing mine and I’ll swing yours!’ Sometimes they would have the blues played, but they most was really dancin’ you see. Have fast songs like *Oh My Babe* and *Take Me Back*...”

Mance Lipscomb first saw Sam in Galveston in 1938, when he was already a force with whom any visiting ‘songster’ had to reckon. “In Houston he got a big name,” Mance recalled, “because he was a good songster.” Sometimes Sam accompanied a veteran of the trade, Alger ‘Texas’ Alexander, his celebrated cousin. An immensely popular and prolific recording artist in the 1920s and ’30s,

Alexander played no instrument but often carried a guitar with him, should he encounter a willing accompanist. Alexander’s fluid sense of tempo made him notoriously difficult to ‘second,’ as Lonnie Johnson, who worked with Alexander on several Okeh recordings, testified to Oliver: “You had to be a fast thinker to play for Texas Alexander. When you play out there with him you done nine days work in one!”

Playing for Alexander was a demanding apprenticeship, but one which showed Sam the potential rewards of a blues recording career: Alexander drove the “...first Cadillac that I ever known to be,” Sam would tell Charters.



Photo by Tom Copi



Photo by Don Schlitten

“...everybody admired him, you know, because colored people didn’t have nothing. They didn’t even have Model-T Fords then and you know he come in a Cadillac.” (Sam eventually did his cousin one better. When I met him in 1980, he bragged of owning two Cadillacs!)

Like Alexander, Sam served time on a Houston County Prison Farm in the late 1930s, an experience the autobiographical singer would later recall in several recorded titles, among them *Penitentiary Blues*, *Prison Farm Blues*, *I Work Down on the Chain Gang* and *Prison Blues Come Down on Me*. He told Paul Oliver he served “about coupla hundred days” on a road gang after a fight (“I was...kinda mean”). “You go out, catch the mules, hitch the wagon, get right on down to work,” he recalled. “Every evenin’ when you come in they would chain you, they’d lock you with a chain around your leg...you had a bunk of your own and they’d lock you to a post.” In the time-honored tradition of Leadbelly, Lightnin’ claimed his music bought his freedom: “Got away from there by singin’ the blues,” he said.

In 1946, ‘Texas’ Alexander was himself only recently free from prison when a talent scout, Anne Cullum, heard him singing on Dowling Street to Sam’s accompaniment. Cullum had already gotten fellow Houstonian Amos Milburn on Aladdin Records in Los Angeles and made similar arrangements for Alexander and Hopkins, but reportedly balked at Alexander’s ‘jailbird’ reputation and replaced him with pianist Wilson ‘Thunder’ Smith. Singer/pianist Milburn

claimed he led Cullum to Hopkins, who serenaded him during a recovery from an auto accident: “One night around 1 a.m. I heard this lonesome guitar down the street and I said, ‘Who is this guy sounds so good!’” Milburn told interviewer Steve Tracey. “And it was Lightnin’ Hopkins. So I got to the window and yelled him over and from that night on for five nights a week he would sing the blues for me and that was kind of nice. When I got the [leg] cast off and everything and I was ready to go, I went over to talk to Lightnin’. At that time he had a partner playing piano with him, Thunder Smith. So I went to this lady doctor (Anne Cullum) and brought Lightnin’ over to let her hear him. She was inspired also, so we all packed up and took a train to California.”

It was surely Sam’s furthest trip to date from his beloved Texas. In the distant city of Los Angeles, he both recorded and became Lightnin’ for the first time: an Aladdin recording engineer figured “Thunder and Lightnin’” would look catchy on a record label and it was this newly-named duo which waxed *Katie Mae Blues* on November 4, 1946. The Thunder and Lightnin’ team lasted another session and then Lightnin’, more often than not, was on his own. It suited him: Like his cousin, ‘Texas’ Alexander, his meters were quirky and other accompanists would simply crowd the intimate dialogue between Lightnin’ and his guitar. Back in Houston, there were other sessions for Aladdin and Imperial in 1947-48 and then several for Bill Quinn’s Houston-based Gold Star label between 1948-50.

In 1951, Quinn sold 22 of Lightnin’s Gold Star masters to Modern Records, then one of the leading labels for blues and gutsy R&B. The move from a small regional independent, Gold Star, to the L.A.-based Modern label gave Lightnin’s records national distribution. His star in the ascendant, Lightnin’ obliged all comers between 1951-54, among them *Sittin’ In With*, Decca, Mercury, and Herald. Lightnin’ shone as the much-recorded center of a small group of introspective Texas ‘country’ singer/guitarists—among them Lil Son Jackson, Frankie Lee Sims and Smokey Hogg – who enjoyed a brief vogue in the early 1950s.

The blues audience was then almost exclusively black and its enthusiasm for this music was fueled in ways that seem ironic today. Urban radio stations targeted at black

listeners were still new in the early 1950s and Memphis station WDIA, self-proclaimed “Mother Station of the Negroes,” surged with 50,000 watts as one of the nation’s most powerful. Moohah Williams wore several hats at WDIA, one of which was Mr. Blues, host of a downhome blues show entitled *Wheelin’ on Beale*. Mr. Blues held mock annual elections for President of the Blues, commander-in-chief of an august body called the Royal Amalgamated Association of Chitterling Eaters of America, Inc. for the Preservation of Good Country Blues. Louis Cantor described one memorable election in *Wheelin’ on Beale* (Pharos Books, New York, 1992): “A spirited contest in 1954 pitted the incumbent President Lightnin’ Hopkins against his upstart challenger Muddy Waters (whom Mr. Blues liked to refer to as the ‘unclean stream’)...Mr. Blues himself took a forthright stand for the old order by becoming Lightnin’ Hopkins’s Campaign Manager. ‘The forces of destruction are on the march and are boring from within with an insidious deadliness,’ he said in an interview just before the election. ‘We must not be caught unaware. Vote now for a true blues ticket. Vote for Lightnin’ Hopkins.’” History records that, while Muddy walloped him on the R&B charts with such stingers as *Hoochie Coochie Man* in 1954, Lightnin’ nonetheless retained a loyal constituency at WDIA and his President of the Blues moniker.

It may have been small consolation, however, as the black audience for his music (and offers to record it) receded in the mid-1950s. Yet it was stations like WDIA which unintentionally opened the door to Lightnin’s next audience. Radio formats targeted at the African-American marketplace made a wide range of ‘hidden’ music suddenly accessible to all Americans. More than ever before, white listeners could vicariously eavesdrop on black culture and music. Those with more than a passing curiosity might even seek out the recordings of artists with such exotic and sinister sounding names as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. Men like Lightnin’ were fast fading from commercial favor in the black community, but they were building an as yet invisible new audience comprised of young white listeners who tuned in (often over parental objections) to hear songs that spoke frankly from the far side of the American Dream. This new audience listened furtively to static-ridden ‘colored’ stations and thrilled to hear a grim

voice bray over a wiry guitar about a *Mussy-Haired Woman* (a 1956 Lightnin' single). It was an entirely other experience from hearing Perry Como croon *Round and Round*.

White fascination with the blues wasn't exactly new. Chris Albertson paints a vivid portrait in his Bessie Smith biography of 'roaring Twenties' New York swells entertained at Carl Van Vechten's soirees by the singing

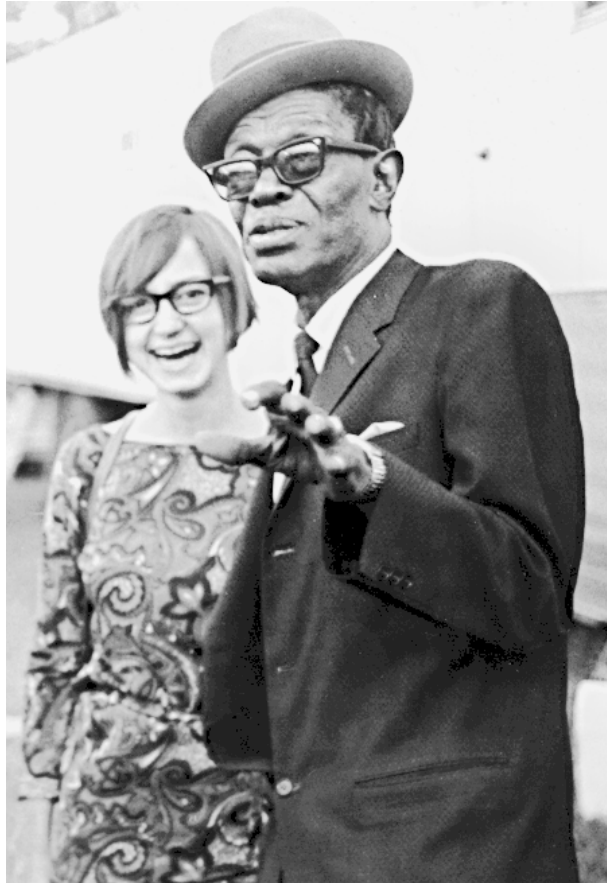


Photo by Tom Copi

(and antics) of the blues Empress. John Hammond's legendary *From Spirituals to Swing* concert brought Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and other blues 'primitives' before uptown jazz buffs in 1938. Folk and blues enthusiasts shared a rare common passion in blues. The savvy Broonzy exploited this, touring Europe in the early 1950s and touting himself as America's last living blues singer. But by 1958 Broonzy himself was dead and Muddy Waters' initial forays before white blues purists, especially in England were rejected as aggressive and overamplified. The astonishing parade of pre-War blues rediscoveries—Son House, John Hurt, Skip James, Bukka White—was still half a decade in the future. A trickle of reissue albums, most significantly the Riverside label Blind Lemon Jefferson Lps (praised in both *down beat* and *Sing Out!*), had whetted both folk and jazz appetites for authentic country blues, especially the Texas variety. The stage thus set, Lightnin' Hopkins was about to make a propitious entry.

Samuel B. Charters' influential book, *The Country Blues*, was published in 1959 and closed with a vivid chapter about Lightnin', "the last of the great blues singers."



Photo by Michael P. Smith

Charters had found him in Houston and in January of 1959 there recorded the material for the Folkways album *Lightnin' Hopkins* (reissued in 1990 as Smithsonian/Folkways CD SF 40019). Included was a moving spoken recollection of Blind Lemon Jefferson and a performance of Jefferson's *See That My Grave Is Kept Clean*. Charters thus underlined the lineage of a certified legend in Lightnin's music. For collectors who revered Jefferson, hearing Lightnin' remember him and perform his music was a riveting experience akin to a later decade's blues fans hearing Johnny Shines sing Robert Johnson's songs. Here was a living link to a mythic past. Lightnin's obscurity in Houston abruptly ended.

Following a recording 'dry spell' of nearly three years duration, the second of eight more 1959 sessions came only a month after Lightnin's Folkways recordings, his first to be marketed to a white urban audience. That audience was eager to see him perform and got its first glimpse at a 'hootenanny' in Houston's Alley Theatre presented by folklorist Mack McCormick. In 1960, Lightnin' made the first of many tours of the West Coast, performing at the Troubadour in Los Angeles and the University of California Folk Festival in Berkeley. He had ventured to New York City once to record for Sittin' In With in 1951 and returned for an eventful month late in 1960, beginning with a Carnegie Hall concert on October 14th and culminating with his recordings for Nat Hentoff's Candid label on November 15th.

(Hentoff remembers Lightnin' as "calculating. He was meticulous about mike placement and things. He knew what he was doing.")

Lightnin' certainly made the most of his 1960 visit to New York City. He performed at the Village Vanguard and appeared on a CBS television program, *A Pattern of Words and Music*. Prior to his Candid session, he had already cut four LPs (yielding 36 titles) for Bluesville/Prestige, Fire and Sphere Sound.

His Carnegie Hall appearance was on a 'folk' bill featuring Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, with whom Lightnin' performed the spiritual, *Oh, Mary Don't You Weep*. Incongruous as that trio may seem in retrospect, it was a PR coup for Lightnin' to be seen in such company. Seeger was the sainted elder statesman of folkdom and Baez its angelic new diva. Their alliance with the vaunted heir to Lemon Jefferson provided Lightnin' entree to legions of earnest collegiates looking beyond the Kingston Trio for veins of folk music with deeper roots. The blues revival, which coincided with the most idealistic years of the Civil Rights struggle, was beginning to kick in. Lightnin's presence gave it a considerable boost.

During this period Lightnin' made a vivid impression on Baez's manager, Manny Greenhill. "In those days I gambled," Greenhill recalls. "I'd promise an artist \$1,000, have one booking for them and then hustle." Having booked Lightnin' at Radcliffe University, Greenhill was shocked to see his untested gamble descend from a Greyhound bus clutching a cheap and battered Stella guitar in a paper sack. "I was terrified," he recalls. "Lightnin' said, 'Don't worry.' And of course, he was right. I'd never seen him perform. I had no idea he could coax that caliber of music from such an instrument."

Lightnin' could make do with whatever instrument was at hand from plywood acoustic boxes to, in his later days, Fender Stratocasters. In *The Country Blues*, Charters wrote of his playing: "The guitar trailed along, echoing the words, droning in a rhythmic drumming on a lower string, then ringing above the voice between lines and carrying off painfully intense, lyric passages between the verses." John S. Wilson's *down beat* review of Lightnin's Candid recordings said: "The subtle nuances of his phrasing, complemented by his light, spidery guitar patterns, are artistry of

the most compelling sort.” (Lightnin’ won the 1962 *down beat* International Jazz Critics Poll as New Star, Male Singer.) Striking as Lightnin’s marriage of voice and guitar were, his gift for endless lyric invention was his greatest asset. Certainly it was the one which enabled him to record 50 songs in a month’s span in 1960 with little repetition of material. Chris Strachwitz marveled at this “incredible improvised poetry,” which inspired him to start Arhoolie, a label on which Lightnin’ often appeared.

Lightnin’s music was essentially a series of conversations within conversations: Conversations between voice and guitar; Lightnin’ and a woman; Lightnin’ and himself; Lightnin’ and the listener. He could be exuberant or slyly comic, but his most moving performances drew from a deep well of pained introspection he shared with other Texas bluesmen of his generation. You hear it, in sharper threads, in T-Bone Walker’s music and in much of the ‘after hours’ blues that wafted from the West Coast in the 1940s, the quintessential example being Charles Brown’s 1946 hit, *Drifting Blues*. (Lightnin’ ‘countrified’ Brown’s song for Gold Star as *Walking Blues* in 1948). Unlike the Southwesterners who settled in Los Angeles, Lightnin’ remained firmly rooted in hardscabble Texas soil. His version of this moody music was elemental and for its starkness, all the stronger.

After 1959, Lightnin’s income-producing career was tied to performances before white audiences, though he never stopped playing for his own people in Houston, where, he said, “I can be broke and hungry and walk out and someone will buy me a dinner. It ain’t always like that in a strange place where you don’t know no one.” Lightnin’s new found celebrity made him a local hero in Houston’s Third Ward. He was often a feature of Houston’s annual Junetenth celebration (June 19th is celebrated by black Texans as the day of emancipation). Local rivals acknowledged his primacy with a nudge: Juke Boy Bonner recorded a *Look Out Lightnin’* in 1967, in which he sang: “They tell me you ‘sposed to be the last of the blues singers, Lightnin’, but you got to give some room to me.”

Though he preferred staying home, Lightnin’ took his music to far-flung venues. His English and European appearances on the 1964 *American Folk Blues Festival Tour* were a sensation; he toured Europe as late as 1977, appearing at the Rotterdam Jazz Festival in the Netherlands.

Photo by Don Schlitten



At every opportunity, he recorded. Produced by sensitive admirers like Charters or Strachwitz, Lightnin's 'rediscovery' era recordings yielded stunning performances which equalled any waxed in the 1940s-1950s. But given

an indifferent producer and a frank goal of quick cash, Lightnin's torrent of 1960s-1970s albums did little to enhance his reputation.

The flood of Lightnin' vinyl which glutted Lp 'cut out' bins a dozen years ago is long since vanished and the CD excerpts of his massive oeuvre tend to focus on the best of his early and 'rediscovery' recordings. It is easier to make sense of Lightnin's music from the judicious pruning of it currently at hand than it was from the 'embarrassment of riches' overwhelmingly available in the past. (I recall his Gold Star/Modern recordings showing up on 8-track tapes in dime store bargain bins in the 1970s!)

Lightnin' Hopkins died of pneumonia on January 30, 1982 in a Houston hospital. (The previous July he had undergone surgery for cancer of the esophagus.) My memory of him is of a blustery man with a storm in his spirit whose Los Angeles chauffeur I was one weekend in 1980. It was my duty to get Lightnin' from his hotel to his gig and back. He traveled with an athletic tote bag (it never left his side) in which he carried a pint of whiskey and cans of Pearl, a Texas brew not found outside the Southwest. "You can't get that here," he sniffed in summary dismissal of L.A.'s provincialism. Lightnin' wasn't easily cornered in conversation, but leapt freely into stream of consciousness monologues: "I been ever'where a po' man can go. I played in Tokyo. Shit, Tokyo! We bombed that son-of-a-bitch in the War. But I'm not goin' back overseas, man. The people are alright, met some nice people, but it's the weather. I was over there one time, it was so cold it froze my nuts. An' I ain't had nothin' to do with no woman ever

since. You think I'm lyin', but that's the truth!"

Lightnin' had little use for other guitarists: "Can't nobody talk 'bout me bein' jealous of no guitar player," he boasted, "'cause I learned all them sons of bitches how to play!" Even B.B. King? "Listen at him! He ain't got but one tune. He come down to Galveston one time and got all his stuff from me." One longtime associate said in admiration, "Some folks mellow when they get older, but not Lightnin'! He'll be scratchin' n' bitin' till the day he dies."

The sole conversation in which I engaged him began with me telling him I last heard him play in Oklahoma City. "Man, that's a tough town," he said. "Them cowboys is rough. Wonder what makes them so rough?" Then we talked about rodeo clowns and bull riders, sharing a mutual respect for the badness of cowboys. And once we were talking, I asked if he would play a song during his performance that night:

*Don't the moon look pretty,
Shinin' through the trees?
Don't the moon look pretty, darlin',
Shinin' down through the trees?
I can see my baby, but she can't see me."*

"You want to hear that?" Lightnin' said. "Yeah, all right. You know I remember that. You ask me nice. Now if someone ask me nice to play somethin', I do it."

Lightnin' honored my request that night and I recall with gratitude that and the many other occasions when his music moved me. His bitterness, transformed into music, gave off an awesome beauty. Lightnin' made blues as deep and raw as anyone who ever worked the idiom. Despite deep chasms of time and culture, his "audio snapshots" still sear listeners with piquant pains and pleasures: pains of penitentiaries and sharecropping and loves lost, pleasures of country frolics and Texas moons shining on sleeping lovers. Listen. Such poetry as his will not be sung again.

LIGHTNIN' AS OTHERS SAW HIM



Photo by Michael P. Smith

New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 1974

"He moves from one furnished room to another in Houston, and it's hard to find out where he's living...A pawnshop owner said he knew a Sam Hopkins, had his electric guitar in and out... A thin, nervous man leaned out the [car] window.

'You lookin' for me?'

'You Lightnin'?'

'That's right.'

...He sang until he became so tense emotionally that it was impossible to talk to him. He drank steadily, but he seemed to play more brilliantly and sing with even greater intensity... Lightnin', in his way, is a magnificent figure. He is one of the last of his kind, a lonely, bitter man who brings to the blues the intensity and pain of the hours in the hot sun, scraping at the earth, singing to make the hours pass. The blues will go on, but the country blues, and the great singers who created from the raw singing of the work songs and the field cries the richness and variety of the country blues, will pass with men like this thin, intense singer from Centerville, Texas." – *Samuel B. Charters, The Country Blues, Rinehart & Co., New York, 1959.*

"Around Houston they enjoy him in an entirely natural way, flocking to beer taverns to drink and dance and occasionally listen, and when he rises to the best of what is in him, to cross his palm with silver...Paradoxically, he is at his best where the audience is most inclined to ignore him; at a crowded dance hall or a noisy street corner where he has to compete with distractions, or must fight to engage the attention of the crowd, and cannot dominate the situation until he has drawn upon the deepest reserves of his creative power."– *Mack McCormick, liner notes to Lightnin' And Co. Bluesville 1061 (1962)*



Photo by Tom Copi

“Lightnin’ Hopkins was perhaps the most inventive and emotional blues singer I ever met...Throughout the years I have heard many other great blues singers, but Lightnin’ Hopkins has remained my favorite. I never tire of his records, especially his early ones, made before I ever met him, and each performance is an emotional and memorable human experience.” – *Chris Strachwitz, liner notes to Po’ Lightnin’, Arhoolie 1087 (1983)*

“I remember Lightnin’ did a couple of tunes about women wearing rats on their heads: ‘rats’ was a popular name for a way young women back in the ’50s used to wear a little ball of hair on their head. In other words, at that time he was kind of current with what was going on. He was doing things that I wished I could have done...When I was a disc jockey [on WDIA] and even before that—the tunes that he was making made me want to really try to become a blues player.” – *B.B. King, Guitar Player, June 1982*

“His music was...the music of the evening resurrection of an entire people.” – *Jane Phillips, Mojo Hand, Trident Press, 1966*

“Lightnin’ Hopkins picked up an African hunter’s two-string fiddle that I had collected in Nigeria and played a blues on it...” – *Paul Oliver, Blues Off the Record, Da Capo Press, New York 1984.*

“Lightnin’ Hopkins was always one of my idols. I loved him and he had a lot of influence on me. I’ve got a bigger stack of Lightnin’ Hopkins records than anybody else’s...I remember a long time ago I was playing a local bar in Houston and one of the frats came up and said [to Lightnin’], ‘Do you mind playing something by John Lee Hooker?’ And he said, ‘I am Lightnin’ Hopkins. I don’t play nothin’ else...’ Lightnin’ enjoyed playing for his people

in Houston...He could have done a lot of things, but he felt a lot more comfortable drinking and shooting craps with his friends back in Houston. He'd go out to California or Europe, make a good bit of money and as soon as the gig's over, he was back in Houston. When the money ran out, he'd go on the road again." – *Johnny Winter, Guitar Player, June 1982*

"Lightnin's lined face, usually hidden behind dark glasses and shaded by a cowboy hat and his chain gang ankle scars testify to the hardness of his life. His blues are intense but relaxed and effortlessly so, almost spontaneous conversational revelations of his own feelings and reaction to the world he has known. He still plays for country parties as he always has, sitting back with an air of casual detachment, acutely aware of his own mastery and artistry. His musicianship still owes something to the childhood encouragement of his idol Blind Lemon in the irregular guitar patterns, the suspending of the rhythm to sing and answer the words with extended runs and in an uncluttered directness of expression...he remains firmly part of the Houston ghetto, revered by those who know him, with his gold-capped teeth, straightened hair and the unforced aura of being his own man." – *Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York & London, 1976.*

"I did get to play with Lightnin' Hopkins at the Granada Theater. That was in 1976, '77. That was fun. He was a grumpy old coot. I guess he had heard it all...Lightnin' Hopkins, though, could really play. He was great." – *Anson Funderburgh, quoted in Alan Govenar's Meeting the Blues, Taylor Publishing Co., NY, 1988.*

"He frequently plays concerts and universities, too and sometimes dismays his audiences by being as irascible, cantankerous and downright mean on stage as he is known to be off." – *Bruce Cook, Listen to the Blues, Charles Scribner's Sons, NY, 1973.*

"Houston was Lightnin's town...He was leader of Houston's Fourth Ward, one of the oldest black sections in Houston and managed the Fourth Ward Apartments, where he lived for free. He was regarded throughout the community as just a pillar for being there so long and being so well respected. He had become famous and the blacks could relate to his fame because it was about their own heritage, the blues.

"Lightnin' always had a new Cadillac. Where he got the money, nobody knows. He was a real flashy kind of guy—always dressed in the finest of fine. He had a constant cigar in his mouth with a little cigar holder. Never without it. In fact, I heard a few people remark as they passed by his coffin, 'Yeah, they done a pretty good job on ol' Lightnin', but where's his cigar?'" – *Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top, Guitar Player, 1982*



Photo by Kathy Murray - Austin City Limits, 1979

“WATCH THE STRINGS, NOW, NOT MY FINGERS” THE PERFORMANCES

In 1960, German filmmaker Dietrich Wawzyn combed America shooting footage for a series of West German television documentaries on American roots music: blues, gospel, country, New Orleans jazz and Hawaiian music. Chris Strachwitz went along as sound man and naturally pointed Wawzyn to Lightnin'. This video opens with probably his earliest filmed appearance performing an archetypal Texas blues, *Lonesome Road* and an atypically minor-keyed boogie, *Lightnin's Blues*, the latter suggesting his effectiveness as one-man band.

Seven years later, Lightnin' found himself on display at the University of Washington Ethnomusicology Department. There he performed a distinctly Lightnin'-ized *Baby, Please Don't Go*, for which he casually claimed authorship. Big Joe Williams, who first recorded the song in 1935 would beg to differ, but Lightnin' had likely been performing it so long that it became, in his mind anyway, his song (he first recorded it for Gold Star in 1948). He could honestly claim *Mojo Hand*, which may have been his last hurrah on black jukeboxes when Bobby Robinson released it as a single on his Fire label (he waxed it during Lightnin's eventful 1960 New York City junket).

Lightnin's vagueness about the song's meaning (“Lotsa people wants to know what that is—I ain't gonna tell 'em”) may have been more than mere coyness. Perhaps it meant any number of things, or nothing in particular. In 1930's *Talking to My Self*, Blind Willie McTell went ferreting after his mama's mojo (an apparent double-entendre), while Muddy Waters sought a magic amulet in the mojo hand of his 1950 hit, *Louisiana Blues*. Read Jane Phillips' *Mojo Hand* for one description of this spellbinding device and the “Mojo Hand” chapter in Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* for quite another. (Different still is Mack McCormick's definition of the mojo hand as “a charm soiled with menstrual blood, guaranteed to insure fidelity.”) With its quasi-African name, the mojo hand may be a kind of blues Rorschach test which needn't have too precise a definition.



Take Me Back is the oldest piece performed here, a song Lightnin' used to entertain farm workers at long-ago country dances and which reflects pre-blues Texas traditions. It was widely popular with Lone Star songsters; Blind Lemon Jefferson recorded it as *Beggin' Back* in 1926 and you can hear Mance Lipscomb's version on *Mance Lipscomb in Concert* (Vestapol 13011).

During the same 1967 visit to Seattle, some of Lightnin's music was captured by the Seattle Folklore Society. *Hurricane Beulah* is the sort of topical song for which Lightnin' was noted, though it can't honestly be said that it was made from scratch. Ostensibly a song about one of the hurricanes which periodically brutalize the Texas gulf coast, he refers to "a mean ol' twister" (tornado) which was actually the title of one of his songs from his debut Thunder and Lightnin' session in 1946! He had sung about *Hurricanes Carla and Esther* for Arhoolie in 1961 and about *Hurricane Betsy* for Verve-Folkways in 1965. Such catastrophies were inevitable parts of life on the Texas coast and Lightnin' could readily recycle lyrics describing an earlier season's calamity under the name of the latest hurricane. His ability to cobble bits of earlier songs into ones seemingly fresh was a skill at which the prolific Lightnin' excelled.

The impetus to perform Slim Harpo's 1965 hit, *Baby Scratch My Back*, was simply that it was immensely popular, one of the last blues performances to enjoy pop 'cross-over' success and probably much requested in Houston bars. Lightnin' gives it his sly best.

Three years after his 1967 Washington appearances, Lightnin' gave a memorable performance on Los Angeles station KCET-TV's *Boboquivari*. *Couldn't be Satisfied* is a

quintessential Lightnin' mood piece, while *Questionnaire Blues* is a fascinating bid for 'relevance' before a young audience as the Vietnam War raged. Lightnin' knew the draft was unpopular, while his audience likely didn't know he was remembering lyrics borrowed from blues older than most of them, lyrics which first voiced the ambivalence of black inductees during World War II. That



Photo by Michael P. Smith - New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 1974

experience stimulated sundry blues about the draft (Lonnie Johnson cut two fine ones in 1942, *Baby Remember Me* and *20 to 44*, a title reflecting the age limits of eligible draft-ees). Lightnin' surely remembered them: Legend has it he was saved from the clutches of Uncle Sam by a stabbing which hospitalized him on the eve of being drafted!

Ain't It Crazy was Lightnin's version of a 1959 Excello label hit, *It's Mighty Crazy*, waxed by Louisiana bluesman Lightnin' Slim (Otis Hicks). *Shining Moon* was a staple of Lightnin's repertoire first recorded for Gold Star in 1948. One of his few songs in which the legacy of Blind Lemon's guitar style remained clearly audible, it's also one of Lightnin's most luminously poetic works. Jane Phillips has her Lightnin' surrogate, dubbed Blacksnake Brown, perform it in her novel, *Mojo Hand*: "Blacksnake raised his hand and called out solemnly to the moon...he and the guitar were one, moving and pleading. 'Don't the moon look pretty, shining down through the trees...'"

Black and Evil is a vestige of Lightnin's association with 'Texas' Alexander. Its provocatively blasphemous lyrics rework ones Alexander sang in his 1934 recording,

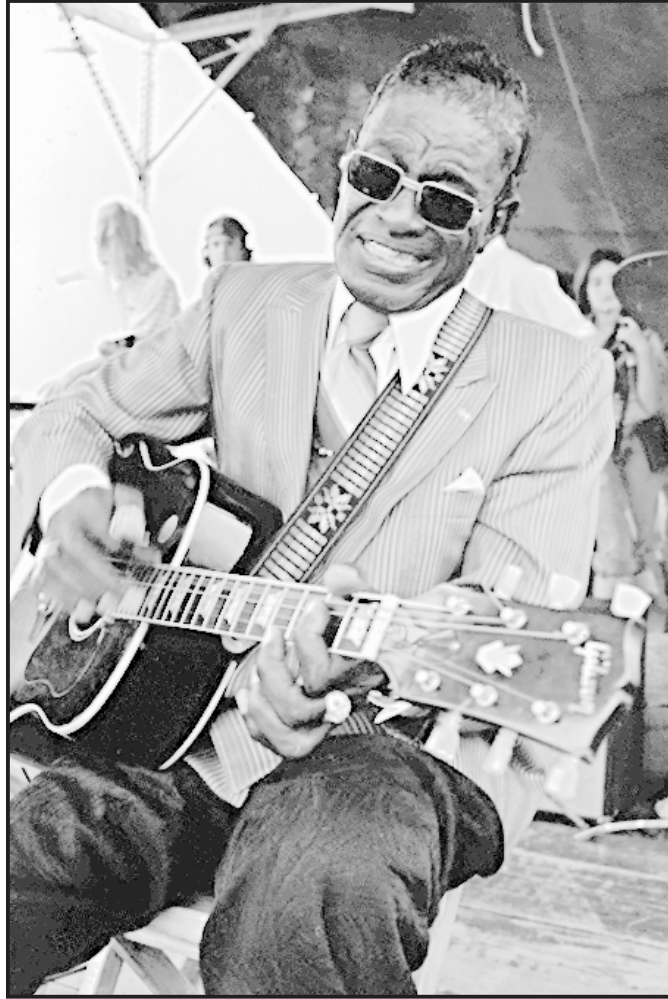
Justice Blues and later in his final 1950 session's *Bottoms Blues*. *Lightnin's Boogie* is a guitar showcase, always a highlight of his performances, while *What'd I Say* is Lightnin's version of Ray Charles's huge 1959 hit. (Lightnin' voiced his admiration of Charles in a 1962 Prestige label album cut, *Me and Ray Charles*.) The 1970 performances close with *How Long Has It Been*, the nearest thing offered in these performances to a 'holy blues.' Lightnin' had previously performed it in the Les Blank film, *The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins*.

A well-heeled Lightnin' appeared on Austin City Limits in 1979, accompanied by Ron Wilson on bass and Bill Gossett on drums. Along with reprises of *Mojo Hand* and *Black and Evil*, Lightnin' offered the blues perennial *Rock Me Baby* (first recorded in 1950 by Lil Son Jackson as *Rockin' and Rollin'*) and some original observations on women and cars, *Ain't No Cadillac*. The 67 year old Lightnin' aimed to prove he was an old dude with young-fashioned ways; note the rakish fedora and his cranking wah-wah pedal! Note, too, how he seemingly tries to throw his bass player with his idiosyncratic timing during his solo on *Mojo Hand*. ("Black and Evil" indeed!) The ever-resourceful Lightnin' revamps *Ain't It Crazy* as an outro to say goodbye to his audience on what was his last video appearance.

From the Houston streets of 1960 to an Austin soundstage nearly 20 years later, this video collects a range of Lightnin's work, a visual complement to the recordings Chris Strachwitz calls "brief audio snapshots of one of the great folk poets to emerge from the African-American experience in Texas." We can add to them these vital "video snapshots" as well.

– Mark Humphrey

*For help with background material,
thanks to Mary Katherine Aldin.*



“I WAS JUST TOO TOUGH”

*In the Les Blank film, *The Sun's Gonna Shine*, Lightnin' is seen surveying a country town's main street next to a sign:
“Centerville—population 836.”*

“Centerville, Texas is my home. Ain't too much to tell you about it. It's just a little ol' one horse town. Born and raised there. Didn't stay there long. Left there when I was eight years old. I went back when I was 12; leave again. Just travelin'. I didn't get no schoolin', man. I got my education by sittin' around talkin' and lookin' at what this one do and what that one do. You go to that field, there was your school with that hoe and plow that mule. Chop that cotton. Well, I said I wasn't going to do it. I didn't. I was just too tough. Why, I just know'd there was something in store for me, man. It wasn't nothin' on the end of that hoe handle for me. Chopping cotton, plowing that mule for six bits a day. That wasn't in store for me.”

LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS

RARE PERFORMANCES - 1960-1979

1. LONESOME ROAD
1960 (filmed by Dietrich Wawzyn in Houston, Texas)
2. LIGHTNIN'S BLUES
1960 (filmed by Dietrich Wawzyn in Houston, Texas)
3. BABY PLEASE DON'T GO
1967 (University Of Washington)
4. MOJO HAND
1967 (University Of Washington)
5. TAKE ME BACK
1967 (University Of Washington)
6. HURRICANE BEULAH
1967 (Seattle Folklore Society)
7. BABY, SCRATCH MY BACK
1967 (Seattle Folklore Society)
8. COULDN'T BE SATISFIED
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
9. QUESTIONNAIRE BLUES
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
10. AIN'T IT CRAZY
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
11. SHINING MOON
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
12. BLACK AND EVIL
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
13. LIGHTNIN'S BOOGIE
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
14. WHAT'D I SAY
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
15. HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN
1970 (Boboquivari - KCET-TV Los Angeles, California)
16. MOJO HAND
1979 (Austin City Limits - KLRU-TV Austin, Texas)
17. AIN'T NO CADILLAC
1979 (Austin City Limits - KLRU-TV Austin, Texas)
18. BLACK AND EVIL
1979 (Austin City Limits - KLRU-TV Austin, Texas)
19. ROCK ME BABY
1979 (Austin City Limits - KLRU-TV Austin, Texas)
20. *Good Night Blues*
1979 (Austin City Limits - KLRU-TV Austin, Texas)

BONUS TRACKS:

21. *Baby, Come Go Home With Me*
1960 (TV Special - New York City)
22. *Going Down Slow*
1960 (TV Special - New York City)
23. *Bunion Stew*
1960 (TV Special - New York City)
24. *Let's Pull A Party*
1960 (TV Special - New York)

Photo by Ed Badaux





From Blind Lemon Jefferson to Freddie King, Texas gave the world generations of extraordinary blues singer-guitarists, of whom none made a deeper impression than Sam 'Lightnin'' Hopkins (1912-1982). He was the embodiment of Texas country blues and inspired novelists, filmmakers, and of course, countless blues singer-guitarists. The stunning impact of his charismatic performances comes fully to life in this DVD tracing Lightnin's career subsequent to his re-discovery in 1959.

Samuel Charters found him on hard times in Houston and brought 'Po' Lightnin' to the attention of white folk audiences. In 1960 German filmmaker Dietrich Wawzyn captured Lightnin' on his Houston home turf, and the clips here of him performing on the street and in a Houston bar are rare glimpses into his milieu (and the earliest known footage of Hopkins). Seven years later a relaxed Lightnin' delivered engaging folk-blues performances for Seattle folklorists, five of which appear here. In 1970 he painted a masterful and entertaining musical self-portrait in eight songs from the Los Angeles PBS show *Boboquivari*. Finally, Lightnin's "lion in winter" appearance on *Austin City Limits* in 1979 shows a still-powerful country bluesman disproving the old dog/new tricks adage with a Stratocaster and wah-wah pedal! Four rare performances from a 1960 TV show are included as bonus tracks. This collection offers a fresh reflection of one of the most deeply creative and entertaining characters who ever sang and played the blues.

1. Lonesome Road
2. Lightnin's Blues
3. Baby Please Don't Go
4. Mojo Hand
5. Take Me Back
6. Hurricane Beulah
7. Baby, Scratch My Back
8. Couldn't Be Satisfied
9. Questionnaire Blues
10. Ain't It Crazy
11. Don't The Moon Look Pretty
12. Black And Evil
13. Lightnin's Boogie

14. What'd I Say
15. How Long Has It Been
16. Mojo Hand
17. Ain't No Cadillac
18. Black And Evil
19. Rock Me Baby
20. Good Night Blues

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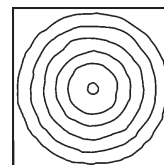
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