

## Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins – A Description

Mack McCormick

Lightnin Hopkins is a street corner blues minstrel who lives in a world crowded by jukeboxes. Since first recording in 1946 he has produced songs for more than a dozen firms ranging from Decca and Mercury to the mysterious and suspect label which simply bore the name "Lightnin". Along his native Dowling Street in Houston's Third Ward, the coin machines abound with these cluttered and uncharacteristic examples of himself.

Sipping a beer in a corner jook joint, Lightnin will grunt disapproval at his own voice coming from the jukebox. As if in retaliation he'll wander outside, guitar in hand, to delight a circle of friends with some freely improvised blues—a mixture of narrative and song underscored by his easy, dramatic guitar.

Lightnin is fundamentally incapable of joining in on the trends of the music industry. He remains true to his inheritance: the simple, honest blues of wandering, begging songsters. He stays where he feels the people best understand his music. He earns his way in the world with his voice and his guitar, and he takes his satisfaction in the look of understanding that flickers across a friend's face as he sings about some intimate, common experience.

This attitude is the living, breathing, here and now of traditional music. Yet Lightnin is a menace to the concept of a "pure" tradition. He stands amid the great whirlpool of the blues, drawing upon it at random, bending it to suit a mood, taking impish pleasure in creating surprises—constantly shaping, shattering, and remaking the blues in his own image.

When on rare occasions he touches members of the cadre such as *See See Rider* or *Trouble In Mind*, fresh new verses are invariably present. Singing Long John, the Texas prison song which relates a legendary escape, he transforms it into a first person narrative, lending personal frenzy as he cries ". . . them hell's hounds, boy, coming after me."

His Backwater Blues has only the barest hint and glimpse of the song as Lightnin first heard it from Lonnie Johnson (and as it become famous through Bessie Smith's recording). This memory mingles with his recollection of Blind Lemon Jefferson's singing Rising High Water Blues and of Texas Alexander's singing Frost, Texas Tornado Blues. It crosses his own experience with a tornado slashing across the "Piney Woods". Dominated by Lightnin's personality, just as each of the parent songs was dominated by the inclinations of the singer, the final distillation is That Mean Old Twister. Lightnin's rich voice rings out its startling plea: "Lord—turn your twister the other way."

The process is of course basic. A tradition such as the blues is perpetuated not by attempts to emulate and preserve, but through growth and the contributions of many egos. Such growth occurs dramatically in the day-to-day work of Sam Hopkins. Exposed to and accepting all influences, he absorbs and contributes with a proud sense of his uniqueness.

He often prefaces himself with a statement such as "Now this song I'm going to sing—don't nobody sing it this way but Lightnin Hopkins, himself, alone."

Born in 1912 in Leon County, Texas, Lightnin's apprenticeship was alongside Blind Lemon, Lonnie Johnson, and Texas Alexander. He has spent his life wandering the same streets and highways as Leadbelly and Blind Willie Johnson. He regards his predecessors with moderate awe and his contemporaries with scorn. Speaking of the many singers who merely imitate his manners and steal his lines, rushing off to record for minor jukebox labels, Lightnin's eyes flash murderously. Nonetheless, the number of his imitators is an index to his own influence and rank.

The unchallenged reigning blues minstrel of Houston's streets, Lightnin sleeps in a tawdry rented room and lives with the easy grace of royalty. On one of his rare excursions outside Texas an engagement in a Los Angeles dance hall in connection with a recording session, his billing read "Internationally famous recording star." Lightnin's scowl at this high-flown phrase was simple disinterest, a real failure to attach any significance to the statement. In his own scale of values, international fame is of small consequence. What is vital and significant is the continuing respect and adulation of those who stroll Dowling Street, crowding around him to offer coins in exchange for songs.

Lightnin is intensely upset by the scorn of youthful Negroes who regard the country blues as somehow degrading to the race. The plaudits of European critics, the discographical mass of his more than 200 records, and the enthusiasm of visiting folklorists do not quite offset the sneer of a single bongo-playing jazzman from the next block. The critics, the records, the folklorists merely represent the abstract and unknown world outside of East Texas. The bongo player represents Lightnin's own tribe and culture, his roots and his audience. He belongs to this home territory and its people—and its blues tradition—with absolute kinship. Alternately the jester and the wizard serving at the royal court, he serves his culture with the sly jest and personal aside, the easy mockery of injustice and full throated cry of tragic awareness.

His isolation and his ignorance is self-imposed, and can be startlingly complete. During a recent recording session for Doug Dobell's limited-edition "77" label, Lightnin searched conscientiously for the proper songs "to sing for those people over across that water." He briefly considered one that begins "Buses stopped running, trains won't allow me to ride no more." He rejected it with the question, "But do they have buses and trains over there?" Some insight to the careful choice of ignorance can be gained if one considers that Lightnin has been exposed to British-based films just as much as the average American citizen. He merely disregards the world beyond his culture.

Even when recording for domestic consumption he is sometimes anxious to make himself understood. Singing ". . . he had a little brown jersey" he felt compelled to inject the explanation "I'm talking 'bout a cow". Yet, in another song he casually commented "Play that, molly trotter" and seemed unconcerned that this vernacular name for a raccoon is pretty much unknown outside the rural South.

However the brash sweep of Lightnin's personality communicates itself even where literal meaning is lost. He recently participated, after squelching his own apprehensions, in a Hootenanny presented by the Houston Folklore Group. The occasion was his first experience before a concert audience or before a predominately white audience of any kind. Nonetheless within moments of his loping onstage and carelessly propping his guitar against a raised knee he had completely stolen the night. He stood before an audience accustomed to the carefully preserved ballads and showed them the raw meat of folk music, casually improvising songs about his own sex habits, his kinky hair, and his days on a chain gang, and the audience roared its approval. The impact of his personality brought the realization that they were having the rare experience of being confronted by the essence of a vital people's music.

In such circumstances—the street corner or the concert stage—much of his charm lies in his animation and innate plucking for responses. Midway in a song he is liable to twirl the guitar away from his body, swinging it back to finish a phrase or slap out rhythms with his palms caressing the sound board. He's able to improvise a dance, twisting and stomping his feet to lend accent to a particular song. He may pick out anguished, lingering guitar phrases, then raise a solemn finger to point at a listener, his voice filling the air "I been asking Jesus, what wrong have I done . . . "

In his finest moments Lightnin becomes a dramatist with an incredible knack for spontaneous rhyme and crisp, scene setting narration. He'll state an experience in the first-person present-tense—picking some intimate memory and bringing it completely forward to the moment—while the guitar suggests shifts of mood and underlines the action. For his last number of the recent concert, Lightnin slumped into a chair, noodling aimlessly until he found a simple boogie pattern to amuse himself. "In the morning I'm getting up and I've got to boogie . . ." His manner suggests coming awake and his talk rambles on about the early morning chores. The boogie slyly fades into *When The Saints Go Marching In*. "It must be Sunday morning, so I'm getting up and I got to boogie and then I'm got to go down the road to church . . . Here I am, singing and shouting . . .

*I want to be in the that number*

And then they call on old Lightnin to pray." His head bows and the guitar seems to represent a silent entreaty. "Now, I'm going back home . . ." The guitar imperceptibly reverts to the boogie. ". . .and I'm got to boogie some more." After a moment the tempo slows. Lightnin' explains, matter-of-fact, "That's when it's getting soft."

Lightnin's songs range over his view of modern life: *Policy Game*, *Sad News From Korea*, *You Got To Work To Get Your Pay*. He's spooky about singing *Death Bells* and reluctant to sing *Tom Moore's Farm* because "when I first made that song, them four Moore brothers come looking for me with a big stick."

His finest impulses seem directed at pure autobiography. *Bunion Stew*, *Mama and Papa Hopkins*, and *I'm Gonna Trip This Town* present a total picture of his family. *Penitentiary Blues* is based on the incident that caused him to serve time on a County road gang; *Like*

*A Turkey Thru the Corn* is his dream of escape; *How Sad and How Bad to be a Fool* is the song apologizing to the sentencing judge who visited the road gang and was thus moved to release Lightnin; *Prison Blues Come Down On Me* is a bitter, evocative picture of his returning home wondering "is my family still there."

Just as this utterly subjective approach leads to his finest, it also leads to his faults. At times he will retreat into a sullen mood, losing interest in his audience, and content to be a dreary and poor imitation of himself. This is especially true when he works five and six hours dance hall jobs—using an amplified guitar and a drummer and having to fit his songs to fast, rocking tempos. At his worst he will repeat himself endlessly, hacking out the same tune with disinterest, monotonously sticking to a single theme of a woman "trying to quit me."

A similar attitude has defaced many of his recordings. Confronted by overbearing supervisors who visit Houston on hasty field trips, thrust into the sterile environment of a sound studio, restricted to strict jukebox tempos and time limitations, Lightnin has on many of these occasions resorted to the easy and convenient clichés. "It's too bad about them records," Lightnin says: "They get me in that big room and they go watch me through a glass wall and I don't feel like nothing. Oh, course those records are good, cause everything I do is good—but they ain't the best. The best only happens when I'm feeling easy."

The amount of whiskey taken during a session is the clue to his inner mood. When uncomfortable, he'll drink himself to the point of sluggish indifference and a tone of self-pity will seem to dominate his voice. The phrases and mannerisms of one song will be duplicated in the next.

More than anything else Lightnin's comfort depends on having a familiar and enthusiastic listener opposite the microphone. On such an occasion, relaxed and with a mild whiskey glow, Lightnin enjoys his own free flowing imagination. With only a bare, fleeting notion he will charge into a song, a composition that is created and forgotten within the time of its performance. This Lightnin is the embodiment of the jazz-and-poetry spirit, representing its ancient form in the single creator whose words and music are one act.

When given complete freedom he will begin each session with a general statement of his particular mood. On one occasion he nodded for the tape machine to be switched on, picked a few tentative chords, and tossing his head back he noticed the rain pattering down a window, and then simply sang the thoughts uppermost in his mind: "Lord, I'm just sittin' down here thinking, what am I gonna do on this rainy day?"

What he did do on that February afternoon—eleven songs telling about women, prison, worry, joy, and death—is now available on an LP released in the U.S. by Tradition Records. That session, typically, concluded with a joyous boogie in which Lightnin invites three imaginary women to come join the three men present in an after-work celebration: "Come on in ... just us three here...we gonna pulla party."

On a more recent session, with his thoughts directed at the British Isles, he impulsively decided on a "Blues for Queen Elizabeth" (inspired by her recent visit to Chicago). In shaping up the song he used the line "I want to go to England so's I can meet the Queen." During the actual recording however, his eye fell on a magazine cover photo of Her Majesty and Lightnin cunningly avoided misunderstanding by singing the line "I want to take my wife to England so's she can meet the Queen. " The song certainly represents a new kind of international diplomacy with its opening line "Yeah, you know this world is in a tangle now, baby, look like this world is going round and round."

The completeness of Lightnin's expression, his ability to focus his personality in song, places him in the centre of the blues tradition. All of the circumstances of his life and choice to remain close to the source are vital contributors to his art's veracity. He is a folksinger who still knows which are his folk. Ultimately, Lightnin's greatest gift is his complete confidence in his own ability to "make it up as I go . . . "

Always apprehensive about strange experiences, Lightnin has recently grown less wary of travel. Photos and live-concert recordings which he has been shown and heard have given him the realisation that interest in the blues extend far beyond the Third Ward. He has discovered that his contemporaries— often men of lesser ability and those far divorced from their sources—have enjoyed the benefits of concert stages in distant lands.

He has already found that a stage offers the same freedom as a street corner. He has partially rejected the latter only because of the uncertainty of "having to be like a beggar." Yet the street corner or the concert stage is, he knows, the ideal situation in which to grip and surprise an audience.

"Texas is where I'm from and where the blues is from," he says, "and it's where we'll always be—but still and all, if there's people over across that water that like my blues and want me over there, I'll go . . ." His impulse to do so has the pure joy of a child's hug. After reading Belgian critic Yannick Bruynoghe's enthusiastic review of his old records recently reissued on Score, Lightnin slapped his leg decisively and said "I'm just going to have to go over there and sing that man a song."

(A discography of Lightnin Hopkins, compiled by Chris Strachwitz, will commence in the next issue. EDITOR.)

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