LIGHTNING HOPKINS

"The Gold Star Sessions – Vol. 1"

Over 60 Minutes of Classic Blues

ARHOOLIE CD-330

1. Short Haired Woman (3131A)
2. Baby Please Don't Go (646A)
3. Going Home Blues (Going Back And Talk To Mama) (*)
4. Automobile Blues (666A)
5. Big Mama Jump (3131B)
6. Loretta Blues (*)
7. Seems Funny Baby (*)
8. Thunder and Lightning Blues (Coolin' Board Blues) (*)
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10. Tim Moore's Farm (640A)
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15. Fast Life Woman (665A)
16. Zolo Go (Zydeco) (* 666B)
17. You Don't Know (640B)
18. Treat Me Kind (641A)
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20. Death Bells (646B)
21. Mad With You (652A)
22. Airplane Blues (652B)
23. Racetrack Blues (*)
24. Unsuccessful Blues (656A)

Total Time: 66:38

All selections were originally recorded directly onto acetate coated 16" metal based master discs by Bill Quinn at his Gold Star studios in Houston, Texas probably between 1947 and 1950. The masters are licensed to Arhoolie Records by Bill Quinn and his heirs. Composer/performer royalties are paid to the widow of Sam "Lightning" Hopkins.

(*) indicates performance was dubbed from an original acetate, or from an LP which included that selection in case it was not issued on a Gold Star 78 originally. The number in parenthesis indicates original Gold Star 78 release number. Not all of these were dubbed from the Gold Star 78s – some were dubbed from original acetates or other 78 releases of the same master, whichever sounded best. In case of #16 the Gold Star 78 release omitted the spoken introduction which was, however, on the original acetate from which this transfer was made. The titles listed here are as they appear on the Gold Star 78s or were written on the acetates in crayon. Titles in parenthesis are those I had assigned the selections on previous Arhoolie LP releases. Many of these selections were on Arhoolie LPs 2007 and 2010.

Edited by Chris Strachwitz & Davia Nelson.

Thanks to Frank Scott for the loan of his clean copy of "Baby Please Don't Go."

Cover by Wayne Pope

Lightning Hopkins

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Vol. 1

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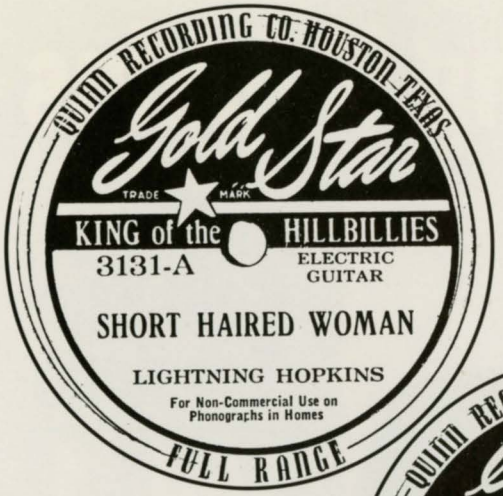

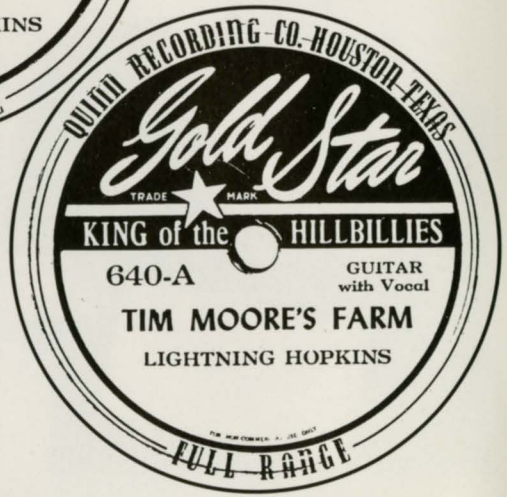

Lightning Hopkins

Sam "Lightning" Hopkins (1912-1982) was the successor to legendary early Texas country blues pioneers Blind Lemon Jefferson and Texas Alexander. Born in Centerville, young Sam Hopkins learned some basic guitar blues from his older half brother Joel Hopkins and by the early 20s he left home and began his long life of eeking out a living by doing farm work or playing and singing for whatever change people would offer. By the mid 1920s Sam was hanging around the country suppers and gatherings where on several occasions he befriended Blind Lemon Jefferson who was then already the most popular country blues singer in central Texas and would soon become nationally famous via his recordings in the late 1920s. About the time Blind Lemon became a recording artist, Sam Hopkins was playing guitar for Texas Alexander, a remarkable folk poet who played no instrument himself but was known by the early 1930s as the best songster in the state of Texas. Unfortunately they never recorded together (the company usually used the very professional and versatile Lonnie Johnson to accompany Texas Alexander for recordings) but their partnership endured and they were heard playing in the streets of Houston up into the late 1940s. Sam learned many songs and fragments from Texas Alexander who sang by himself and had a rough, shouting style of someone hollering out in the fields (he was one of the great singers of arhoolies!). Texas Alexander sang very personal blues and the guitarist accompanying him would never know when to make the changes. Sam Hopkins never

bothered with regular metric patterns either and every song he sang became a very personal expression.

"Lightning" got his nickname because his first records were made accompanying a pianist named "Thunder" Smith. It is ironic that although Sam had played guitar for Texas Alexander during their roamings through the Texas countryside at "suppers," house parties, beer joints, or on the streets of Houston and Dallas, he never got a chance to record with his mentor. In the late 1940s promoter and talent scout for Aladdin Records, Mrs. Anne Cullum (also known as Lola Cullen) who was managing the just beginning career of Amos Milburn, had heard Texas Alexander and Sam playing on Dowling Street in Houston. Mrs. Cullum liked what she heard and made arrangements for both of them to join her on her next recording trip to California. In the last moment however Mrs. Cullum became scared of Texas Alexander, who had just gotten out of prison, and she hired pianist/singer Thunder Smith instead. The story goes that when the recording engineer heard Sam's fast finger work on the guitar and was told that the pianist's name was "Thunder" Smith, well, the rest is history and from that day on the world got to know "Lightning" Hopkins! The sides made by Thunder Smith never went anywhere but Lightning Hopkins got his chance to record his first songs from which "Katie Mae" became his first hit.

A second trip to California followed which resulted in Lightning's second hit: "Short Haired Woman." After that Mrs. Cullum apparently tried in vain to persuade Lightning to take advantage of the newfound fame from his records by going on tour and playing nightclubs and dance halls on the Rhythm & Blues Circuit, also known as the Chittlin' Circuit. Lightning however wanted none of it – he was happy to be getting a little better pay from local Houston tavern owners and would from time to time play for country suppers out in the farming areas where he had come from. Mrs. Cullum gave him up as pretty hopeless and arrangements were apparently made with Bill Quinn to conduct further recording sessions with Lightning in Houston. The selections on these two volumes of the Gold Star masters were recorded during the next few years following the first recording sessions in Los Angeles.

Over the years that I knew Lightning Hopkins I was constantly amazed and impressed by his ability to improvise verses and whole songs if the situation was right for such emotional creativity. Many of the songs on these collections, recorded at the beginning of Lightning's remarkably prolific recording career, were probably fairly well thought out before he went over to Bill Quinn's studio to record them. Lightning knew that Bill was usually good for at least two songs for the two sides of a record whenever he needed some money to augment his meager earnings for serenading on the streets, in beer joints or while riding the bus. Folklorist Mack McCormick felt that much of Lightning's lines and even whole songs were based on those popularized by Texas Alexander or which were a part of the rural black cultural tradition in which Lightning grew up. Most of his recordings however were very personal and bring us poetry using more urbane language than the very rural images portrayed by his country blues predecessors.

I first heard one of Lightning Hopkins' records on the radio probably around 1951. His voice, music, songs and recordings haunted me from that day on. After hearing from Sam Charters as to Lightning's actual whereabouts I took a trip to Houston in the summer of 1959 and met and heard Lightning in person. I clearly recall that hot muggy summer day when I met Lightning in the afternoon in front of the house he was staying in and how he broke into verses addressed to us when Mack McCormick and I walked into the small beer joint where he was playing that night. He was singing a slow blues with a drummer behind him and as he saw us coming in the door Lightning sang: "Woah, this man come all the way from California just to hear poor Lightning play" and from there this poetic genius told us about the arthritis which was bothering him a good deal because it had been raining heavily that hot summer day. Later Mack told me that much of the song was built around the Blind Lemon recording "Pneumonia Blues" (Paramount 12880) which Lightning had also recorded in the late 50s as I'M ACHING and which was one of my favorite Hopkins records. The traditional elements were only incidental and used only as a vehicle to explore his current bad feelings. Lightning went on with the slow blues to sing about how his car barely made it to the tavern that night since the water had covered all the treacherous holes along the poorly paved road. I had never encountered improvised poetry like this before, set to music about the things which were on the singer's mind – things which were no doubt on most of the customers' minds as well. All of it was marvelously rhymed and made into a powerful blues performance. Other songs were directed at certain individuals in the club – especially the women who stood in front of the small bandstand in the corner. Their responses to Lightning's story telling were often as entertaining and added a great deal to the overall ambience of the songs with only the moaning amplified guitar and the bashing drums of Spider Kilpatrick acting as a syncopated rhythmic foundation.

Lightning Hopkins took his inspirations for songs from life as he observed it, intermingled with traditional verses, he planned songs out in his head. Sometimes he wrote down lines so that they would not slip from his mind. Once, while flying with Lightning on an airliner, he suddenly turned to me and said: "Get your pencil and write this down" and once again he had the basis for another blues. On other occasions I observed how friends, acquaintances, or just people who wanted their poems to go out there to the people and perhaps appear on a record, would give Lightning poems written out on pieces of scrap paper. If he liked the idea of the poem Lightning would perhaps change it a bit and then add his usual guitar accompaniment to come up with yet another "number" for one of his record dates.

The songs on this disc/cassette, like all of Lightning's recordings, represent brief audio snapshots of one of the great folk poets to emerge from the African-American experience in Texas. "SHORT HAIRED WOMAN" was the first Gold Star blues release (GS 3131) and was a re-make of his hit for Aladdin Records. The flip side was a variant of the "Little Mama Boogie" which Lightning had recorded backing Thunder Smith. Considering the copy-cat start for Lightning on Bill Quinn's Gold Star label, it is rather remarkable how many

totally original and unique records Lightning proceeded to make over the next few years. Bill Quinn soon discovered that Lightning would not abide by any attempts to secure his recording services on an exclusive basis but would record whenever he needed some money or when the opportunity arose. For a time Bill Quin would sell some masters to Aladdin or simply provide the services and facilities. After a while however Bill apparently felt he could do better with Lightning if he produced and distributed his own records. He did ok locally in the Houston area and along the Texas Gulf Coast. When it came to the other major markets for hard core down home blues such as Los Angeles, Northern California, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, Philadelphia, etc. Gold Star Records simply could not garner the distribution to service those areas. He soon made a deal with Aladdin's competitors in the Rhythm & Blues market as it was then known, the Bahari brothers who operated the Modern label. Mr. Quinn leased to Modern quite a number of masters which had already appeared on Gold Star but simply were not available in many parts of the country. For a while he had the services of Lightning Hopkins pretty well to himself since he was always there when Lightning was ready to record a few "numbers" and he had the cash to pay him off. As Lightning's popularity spread around the country via his records, other companies or agents were drawn to Houston who became interested in his very marketable talents. Bob Shad who had his own labels Jax and Sittin' In With as well as deals with Mercury for releasing many of his masters, came to Houston and at first worked with Bill Quinn to record talent including Lightning Hopkins and then later recorded artists on his own. This period of the early 1950s was the beginning of one of the most lucrative eras for blues records and the singers if they were willing and able to travel and take advantage of their nationwide popularity. The competition for what was basically rural black country music, was soon too much for Bill Quinn and he gave up recording Lightning Hopkins when he realized that more and more agents were coming to town and that Lightning would record for any and all of them as long as they had the cash.

During the few years that Lightning recorded for Bill Quinn, traditional material was still a part of his repertoire, especially in the early days. However Lightning soon found out that the recording directors were always interested in "original" songs because, unbeknown to Lightning, there were additional potential revenues to be earned via the publishing or acquisition of copyrights especially if the song received radio air play or could even be covered by a major pop artist. "BABY PLEASE DON'T GO" was popularized and composed by Big Joe Williams in the 1930s. Lightning's version is very straight forward and very much in the tradition. Lightning told me that "GROSEBECK BLUES" was a song he learned from Texas Alexander who apparently sang it quite frequently. Four takes of this at the time unreleased song were recorded by Lightning and survived on acetates. The first is very short and omits most of the important lines. The second and third takes are very different, the second being stronger but in bad shape. The take heard here is the fourth which is similar to take 3. Take 2 will appear on a forthcoming disc devoted to various Texas country blues from this period. Lightning

told me once that he felt cheated by some labels who would ask him to record a song twice (or even several takes) and since he tended to sing them differently each time, the company would then release both takes but with different titles although he was only paid for one song. The powerful protest song about "TOM MOORE'S FARM" (called Tim Moore on the record) was put together according to Mance Lipscomb, by some field hands who used to work for Mr. Moore in Grimes County. Lightning's record became a local hit on the juke boxes especially out in the rural areas of Central Texas. Many versions of this song recall various incidents but Lightning picked out the most universally understood parts and made it into a commercial record. Such regional topical protest ballads are rare on commercially issued records, due to the fact that the content is often of local interest only and that recording directors and the companies they represent don't want to offend anyone and generally want songs to be of universal appeal. Lightning however was seldom afraid of anything or anyone, and he made the record although I heard a rumor that Tom Moore did appear at a dance in Conroe, Texas one night after the record was released and told Lightning never to sing that song around there again.

"GOING HOME BLUES" is the ultimate autobiographical performance and was probably not released at the time because the text was so self centered. Yet it's an honest picture of Lightning's attitude of self pity. Most of the blues, like most songs in any genre, deal with the opposite sex, and here again Lightning speaks from personal experience. The curiously titled "ZOLO GO" needs a bit of explanation but as soon as you hear the song you realize that Lightning is singing about his impressions of going out to a zydeco dance. When Bill Quinn heard this, he probably had no idea what zydeco was or how to spell it. The 78 release at the time omitted the spoken introduction but Lightning in it made it quite clear what he was going to sing about. Louisiana Creole French is not a written language and we still to this date use a phonetic spelling for the french word for snapbean: l'haricot, and write down ZYDECO! With Lightning's basic organ accompaniment imitating the sounds of the accordion, this turns out to be one of the most delightful documents of a regionally evolving musical tradition and one of the very first zydeco records!

The last selection on this disc "UNSUCCESSFUL BLUES" came about after Bill Quinn had by some misunderstanding paid Lightning's wife for a session and the small jazz combo which was by that time in the studio was corralled by Lightning "to help me out" for this classic spontaneous musical response! On volume 2 of the Gold Star masters (Arhoolie CD/C 337) you will find most of the remaining songs Lightning recorded for Gold Star.

(Chris Strachwitz – 1990)

Transfered from 78s and acetates by Chris Strachwitz.
Noise reduction by Earwax, San Francisco.

Lightning Hopkins
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Lightning Hopkins (1912-1982) was one of the greatest and most popular Texas country blues singers and poets. Most of his recordings, including these early ones from the late 1940s made for the local juke box market, were largely on-the-spot improvisations from Lightning's pleading voice, underscored by his unique and effective guitar style.

Lightning Hopkins – vocals and guitar (organ on #16). Joel Hopkins – second guitar on SHORT HAIRED WOMAN and BIG MAMA JUMP. Frankie Lee Sims – 2nd guitar with a pocket knife on #12. A small combo including bass, piano, and sax is heard on UNSUCCESSFUL BLUES, and the tap dancing heard on #11 is probably L.C. Williams or Joel Hopkins.

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Edited by Chris Strachwitz and Davia Nelson.

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