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(Going Back And Talk To Mama)
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A WOMAN**
9. **BIG MAMA JUMP\***
10. **MR. CROW & BILL QUINN** (talk)
11. **UNSUCCESSFUL BLUES\***
12. **BALD HEADED WOMAN**
13. **ZOLO GO** (Zydeco)\*
14. **PLEASE SETTLE IN VIETNAM**
15. **SHORT HAIRD WOMAN**
16. **THE DICE GAME** (talk)
17. **ONCE WAS A GAMBLER**

\* = original Gold Star recordings

All songs composed by Sam Hopkins and © by Tradition Music, Co. (BMI) and administered by BUG Music, Co., except for "Mojo Hand."

**Sam 'Lightning' Hopkins** -  
vocals & guitar (or piano on #6,  
or organ on #13)  
with: #10: **Harold "Frenchy" Joseph**  
- drums; #4: **Francis Clay** - drums;  
#8: **Francis Clay** - drums & **Geno  
Scaggs** - bass; #12: **Victor Leonard**  
- drums & **Geno Landry** - bass;  
#15: **Francis Clay** - drums; #17:  
**Victor Leonard** - drums & **Geno  
Landry** - bass.

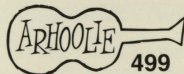
# 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, & 13 recorded by Bill  
Quinn for his Gold Star label in Houston,  
Texas between 1947 and 1950. All other  
selections recorded by Chris Strachwitz  
between 1961 and 1969 in Houston, TX,  
and Berkeley, CA.

**Cover photo** by Stephanie Wiesand  
(Germany 1964)

**Center spread photo** by Chris Strachwitz

**Edited** by Chris Strachwitz &  
Erik Keilholtz

**Graphic Design** by Morgan Dodge



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the best of

**Lightning Hopkins**





# the best of *Lightning Hopkins*

Fifty years ago most afternoons I was tuned to my favorite radio program: "Harlem Matinee" hosted by the colorful and entertaining DJ, Hunter Hancock. He played the latest Rhythm & Blues records over station KFVD in Los Angeles at a time when hardly any black music was heard on American airways. Hunter Hancock was one of a handful of DJs across the country who broke the color barrier on radio by buying blocks of time to present Rhythm & Blues records which eventually led to full time black

radio stations a few years later. KFVD's weak AM signal, however barely reached the eastern outskirts of the L.A. basin where I was a freshman at Pomona College. The records were interspersed with recorded ads for hair straighteners, skin bleaches, and creams which supposedly would shrink hemorrhoids. From time to time very exciting announcements came on, usually read by "old H.H." himself, about up-coming live shows. The variety of artists heard ranged from crooners accompanied by big

bands like Billy Eckstein, to the low-down country blues of John Lee Hooker. My favorites were the "honkers" like Joe Houston and Big Jay McNeely, some of the vocal groups like the Spiders and the Dominoes and especially earthy blues singers and their rhythm bands like Sonny Boy Williamson (his Trumpet sides were just coming out!), Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, Lowell Fulson, Fats Domino, Piano Red, John Lee Hooker and Elmore James. But there was one voice that especially grabbed me, that of Lightning Hopkins. His pleading voice with no band backing but only his eerie and sparse guitar underscoring it, really got to me on "Moonrise Blues" and "Long Way From Texas." Not long after those I heard the record which made a total Hopkins fan out of me: "Give Me Central 209."

On several occasions I rode a bus alone to downtown Los Angeles to see those R&B shows put on by Hunter Hancock at the Olympic Auditorium and other venues. I'll never forget Smilin' Smokey Lynn who seemed to have the longest guitar chord and hopped around the stage like a praying mantis. I am sure Chuck Berry learned a few tricks from him! I had more luck getting rides to Balboa, a popular beach hangout, where in nearby Newport Beach I caught Big Jay McNeely and the Lionel Hampton band at the Avalon Ballroom. Young show-offs were doing the "dirty boogie," as we called it, in front of the bandstand while Big Jay would alternate solos with his baritone sax man, blowing powerful riffs backed by the steady 4/4 beat of the rhythm section. It was the first and best rock & roll I ever heard! Although several blues





acts usually appeared on these shows, especially those in central L.A., I was disappointed that neither Lightning Hopkins nor most of my other favorite blues singers never made an appearance.

One day in 1959 I received a post card from Sam Charters who had been working on his book, "The Country Blues" that he had found Lightning Hopkins in Houston, Texas, and that Mac McCormick was trying to be his manager. Since Sam Charters considered Lightning an important link in the Texas Country blues chain because he had met and played with Blind Lemon Jefferson and in recent years accompanied the legendary Texas Alexander, Mac also became interested in this popular artist. Like a pilgrim, I rode a bus to Houston and was of course most

anxious to hear Lightning Hopkins perform in person after all these years of enjoying and being captivated by his recordings. Mac introduced me not only to Lightning but to pretty much the whole spectrum of African-American culture and traditions in Texas, a place unlike anywhere I had ever been before.

We met Lightning at the small boarding house where he lived, just off Dowling Street in Houston. After some chatter about his records he told us to come by and see him that night at a small beer joint called "Pop's." Mac noted down the directions after Lightning assured us it would be ok for us to hear him play there.

That hot summer night we went to hear my blues idol. It had been raining that day which to me seemed a great relief from the almost unbearable heat, even though it must have also raised the humidity to

100%. When Mac and I walked into the small club, Lightning was moaning the blues into a mike covered with a towel to avoid getting a shock. He was playing a funky sounding electric guitar, backed by his drummer, Spider Kilpatrick. He sang a verse about how the humid weather was causing his arthritis to act up and complained about his aches and in the next verse sang about how due to the water covering all the chuck holes in the road, his car almost didn't get him to the job that night. All the while Lightning's droning guitar was underscoring his complaints while Spider was bashing out the slow beat on the drums. Since he had noticed us entering the place, one of the next verses in this long drawn-out blues was addressed to me: "whoa, this man come all the way from California - just to hear poor Lightning play" - and from there he addressed one of





the women who was trying to egg him on. There was a small crowd in the bar who would verbally engage Lightning and he would reply with marvelously sung and perfectly rhymed-up verses! Some of the songs contained snatches from Lightning's records, like the complaint about his shoulder aching ("I'm Aching" on Herald Records) while other songs or verses seemed to me totally improvised on the spot. This was very personal entertainment - a heated and animated conversation - something I had never encountered before.

It was during this visit to Houston that I decided to start a record label with the prime objective to record Lightning Hopkins "live" in the beer joints where he seemed to thrive and feel at home. That was my dream but reality wasn't quite as simple. Money and the fact that Lightning and his audience were soon to change



dramatically became my main obstacles. Over time I became friends with Lightning and a few years later he did record for me on several occasions. However time changes things and although Lightning made several "live" recordings, they were with and for a different audience. He was unfortunately never documented with his neighborhood audiences the way I first heard him at "Pop's" and similar juke joints in Houston's largely black wards.

Most of Lightning's early 78s from the late 1940s and early 50s are audio snapshots of what was on his mind the day of that recording, sung with the knowledge that he had to project from a juke box the way he did in the neighborhood taverns. Fortunately I was able to obtain the rights to many of the recordings Lightning made for Bill Quinn's

Gold Star label including several (heard on this CD) which were never released on 78s. His later recordings from the 1960s continued to reflect Lightning's personal observations but were increasingly geared to his new, largely white audience except for re-recordings of earlier hits like "Mojo Hand" and "Short Haired Woman." Two very poignant selections, "Tim Moore's Farm" and "Grosebeck Blues" from Gold Star masters, are powerful protest songs. The first is a widely known song (note several, more detailed versions by Mance Lipscomb on Arhoolie CDs 398, 465, & 482) about the Navasota farmer, Tom Moore, detailing complaints about how he treated his hands. The second is a protest about the treatment of black farm hands by a judge in Grosebeck, Texas, which Gold Star never issued. Many of the songs are

autobiographical, especially "Going Home Blues" where Lightning even gives his birth date, which Gold Star also never released. Also in "Whiskey Blues" he tells us why he switched from whiskey to wine and then to gin - not that any of these spirits are good for your health! In "Unsuccessful Blues" Lightning lets us know how upset he was when his wife came by to collect the session money from Bill Quinn before he had a chance to intervene. The song is also an interesting and spontaneous, although largely unsuccessful, attempt on Lightning's part to make use, for his accompaniment, of a rhythm & blues combo which was scheduled to record right after him. I feel it's an improvised Hopkins classic! The final selection which needs a comment is "Zolo Go." This was released on a Gold Star 78 with the

spoken intro cut off and no one could quite figure out what this was supposed to mean until I found the original acetate among Bill Quinn's archives. Suddenly I heard Lightning's intro which makes it clear that he was attempting to reproduce on an electric organ the sounds of an accordion which he heard at Zydeco events. On the original acetate the title is actually inscribed on the disc as ZOLIGO! Bill Quinn probably couldn't figure out what Lightning was trying to tell him about the title - or he tried, as many have tried since then, to spell the term the way his ears heard it! As it turns out this Lightning Hopkins record is the very first ever use of the word or term "zydeco" on record, before it came into general use with Clifton Chenier, the King of Zydeco (Lightning's cousin by marriage).

PS: The reason Lightning Hopkins never appeared on the major Rhythm & Blues shows in the 1950s is because Lightning refused to travel and as a "country boy" he was very suspicious of anyone trying to induce him into the business of music. He knew there were a lot of sharks out in the water and he preferred to stay away from them. Although born in the country near Centerville, Texas, but having a distaste for farm work, Lightning liked his Houston neighborhood, was well known and felt at home there. To make some money he only had to go to Bill Quinn and "make a few numbers," or wait until one of the many traveling "record men" came to Houston looking for him. His favorite pastimes were gambling, fishing, and hanging out with his friends. During his later career Lightning did travel the concert

circuit but each trip was a nerve rattling experience. He literally had a nervous breakdown after crossing the Atlantic ocean for the first time after he had finally agreed to appear in Europe for Horst Lippmann's American Folk Blues Festival. I was with him on that trip and called a doctor but he could not find anything wrong. Finally, after about a week of not being able to play, Lightning's nerves returned to normal with the help of Stephanie Wiesand who lovingly cared for him. Subsequently he ably performed the few required songs per evening, frequently improvising lyrics about the terrifying flight.

Chris Strachwitz - August, 2001

## Other recordings available by **LIGHTNING HOPKINS:**

ARHOOOLIE CD/C 302: **"TEXAS BLUES"** (16 tracks, recorded from 1961 to 1969.)

ARHOOOLIE CD/C 330: **"THE GOLD STAR SESSIONS - VOL.1"** (24 tracks recorded in the late 1940s for the Gold Star label. Remastered from the original acetates and 78 pressings.)

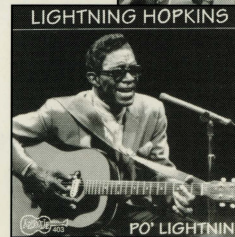
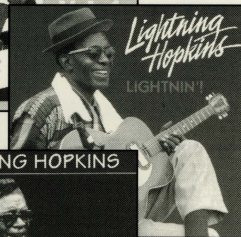
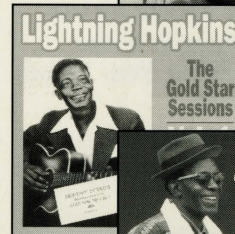
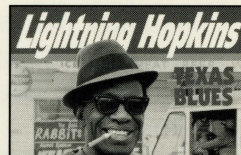
ARHOOOLIE CD/C 337: **"THE GOLD STAR SESSIONS - VOL.2"** (24 tracks recorded from 1947-1950 for the Gold Star label. Remastered from the original acetates and 78 pressings.)

ARHOOOLIE CD/C 340: **"THE HOPKINS BROTHERS - JOEL, LIGHTNING, & JOHN HENRY"** (17 songs, recorded in 1964 & 1965.)

ARHOOOLIE CD 390: **"LIGHTNIN'!"** (20 tracks, recorded from 1963 to 1969.)

ARHOOOLIE CD 403: **"PO' LIGHTNIN'"** (19 tracks, recorded from 1961 to 1969.)

ARHOOOLIE CD 484: Lightning Hopkins, Clifton Chenier, Mance Lipscomb **"LIVE! AT THE 1966 BERKLEY BLUES FESTIVAL"** (7 of these 23 tracks are by Lightning.)



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## Sam "Lightning" Hopkins

vocals & guitar (or piano on #6,  
or organ on #13)  
with various accompaniments

\* = original Gold Star recordings

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Sam "Lightning" Hopkins was the most poetic, haunting and unforgettable country blues bard, with a personal guitar style, to emerge from the streets of Houston, Texas, during the first wave of Rhythm & Blues in the early 1950s.

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**File Under: BLUES**

