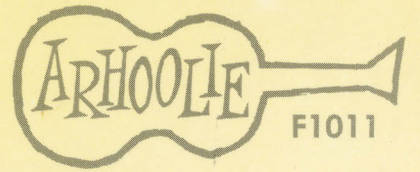


# LIGHTNIN' SAM HOPKINS







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"Give me back that wig I bought you woman, let your dog-gone head go bald . . ." this was the voice that rang out from my loudspeaker one afternoon some dozen years ago while I was going to school in the Los Angeles area. It was yet another record by the man who had introduced me to the blues a few years earlier when Hunter Hancock, the number one Rhythm and Blues disc jockey in Southern California, featured as his "record of the week" on KFVD the very moving "Give Me Central 209." I had never heard anything quite like it. These were the down-home blues: just a guitar and the voice which could put more into a song than anyone else I had ever heard before. This was LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS, a blues singer of rare quality. There was every human expression in his music; his blues had the gripping emotional power of other great blues men such as Big Joe Williams, Robert Johnson, or Blind Lemon, his boogies had that irresistible rhythm which made you jump up and dance and blow your blues away, but perhaps it was his humor and sarcasm which made Lightnin' Hopkins so unusual. You could hear many other fine blues singers on the radio in those hey-days of Rhythm and Blues when the emphasis was still on the Blues. They all had their own style, but in my opinion none of them had the peculiar, unique qualities which put Lightnin' into a class by himself.

In the summer of 1959 I finally went off to Houston, Texas, to see and hear the man who had come out with one fine record after another since I first heard his voice. Houston folklorist and man of many talents, Mack McCormick, took me around town and we went over to see Lightnin'. It was a hot, humid afternoon with intermittent rains drenching the already partially flooded streets of Houston's third ward. Lightnin' was sitting on his front porch and we joined him and a few friends with a few beers. If the weather would clear up he might go out to "Pop's Place"—one of the many jook joints found in many sections of Houston where live music can be heard almost any night of the week. The rain stopped and that night we met again at "Pop's Place." As Mack and I walked in, Lightnin' was already in the corner of the room with his guitar on his lap and the big, battered, old amplifier in front of him. Next to him was his drummer, Spider Kilpatrick. A handkerchief was wrapped around the mike which stood in front of Lightnin', because the unbelievable humidity makes electric shocks an annoying problem for anyone using old electrical equipment. Dark glasses didn't hide his smile as he saw us come in, a towel around his neck. Lightnin' soon broke into one of his powerful songs, with the guitar droning out over the loudspeaker, and the tight, solid beat of the drums rocking the whole place. Most of Lightnin's songs at a joint like this or at almost any performance, perhaps even more so than on records, are on-the-spot improvisations, based on experiences, past or present, flavored with his magnificent taste for the dramatic, but solidly grounded in the Texas blues tradition. I will never forget one of his finest "singles" some years back called "I'm aching" (or: *Sick Feeling Blues* on Herald) based on one of Blind Lemon's old numbers. This song became that evening a highly personal complaint about his

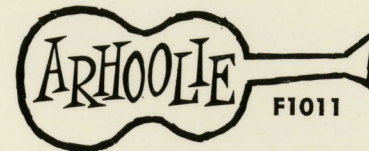
rheumatism which acted up especially on a humid evening like that one. He sang about my coming all the way from California just to hear him play—he rhymed the words as they came to his mind. He is a folk poet supreme—a spontaneous creator—who won't know what he is going to sing until the moment when he leans forward towards the microphone and squeezes the words from his contorted lips. He went on to lament the weather, describing in detail the conditions of the roads which he had to travel to get to his job: the water standing on both sides of the road, at times covering the treacherous holes which the city of Houston won't or finds impossible to repair.

Not every night will you hear the same Lightnin' Hopkins—his work is uneven and varies as his mood and disposition changes. In the afternoon sitting on his porch or in his car, Lightnin' may be brooding or thinking and reflecting—if he sings he does it because he wants to tell his friends something—it will be a very personal song directed at a girl friend walking past—or about something else that has just caught his attention—here all self-consciousness is lacking—he is simply himself—telling you his feelings. Often at night, like that night at Pop's Place, he is very much the same man—but at other times he will become the showman, the dance musician, but always an entertainer, when the audience moves him. At "Irene's" club on Wichman Street one night, where the audience is particularly fond of dancing, he stood up all evening playing one fast boogie after another—he was jumping and the joint really rocked—the audience couldn't get enough. As soon as the drums starting beating again everybody was on their feet twisting and rocking to the powerful pulsing rhythm of the drums and the electric, somewhat overamplified guitar. On another night however, at the "Sputnick Bar," it was a different story. L. C. Williams was on drums that night and they were both in a low-down mood. It was a very small place. Most of the people sat around listening to L. C. who was doing most of the singing. Lightnin' just played guitar—they had nothing but the blues. "Things are tough tonight" Lightnin' called out towards us as he saw us come in "We just got the blues."

Spider Kilpatrick, who accompanies Lightnin' on two numbers on this record, is the man who has worked with Sam for the past ten years or so. He is familiar with Lightnin's music—he knows where to put the accent. They are a real team and there is no better example of their beautiful cooperation than the building boogie called *Meet You at the Chicken Shack*. It was the first number recorded at ACA that afternoon but you can hear and feel how they loosen up and get "groovy." Spider is no doubt the more primitive, the more "down-home," of the two drummers heard on this LP. Spider told me he was brought up in the same wife's home in New Orleans, La., which gave Louis Armstrong his early training. He has since worked at many odd jobs in Texas but his real passions are music and the church whenever he gets religion. Spider plays as much in church as he does blues in the jook joints. Once his drums got busted when a lady "fell on them" during a spirited service at his Sanctified Church. He is a human dynamo behind the drums—small in physical stature but gigantic in musical energy. Spider drummed the night when we heard Lightnin' at Irene's. At times it was just Spider by himself—beating out the rhythm for the dancers while Lightnin' would talk with someone in front of the bandstand. I suggest you listen to this record with the volume turned way up—it's the only way that it will come close to the sound you would hear if you were to join them in Houston this Friday night.

Lightnin' had told me he wanted to make some records again with drums and a bass and so I called up two members of the Jimmy McCracklin band who work at the Savoy Club in Richmond where such blues specialists as Lowell Fulson and T-Bone Walker hold forth whenever they are in the area. Besides playing with Jimmy McCracklin's Blues Blasters Victor Leonard has played drums on many rhythm and blues recordings over the years. Originally from Louisiana, Victor soon discovered that he and Lightnin' were distantly related—they hit it off right from the start and, joined by bass player "Gino" Landry, they poured out some tough down-home blues. The music on this album speaks for itself and reflects the various moods of Lightnin' the dance musician, the songster, the blues man, the showman—here is Lightnin' the way you might hear him at home some day—at home with the blues in Houston. The topics are largely based on recent experiences—from the Los Angeles fire which burned in the Hollywood hills while Lightnin' was playing in L.A., to the autobiographical "Once Was a Gambler." Perhaps the most spontaneous performance was *Ice Storm Blues* recorded shortly after his return to Houston when a bitter cold wave hit the South. One of his old favorites, *Bald Headed Woman*, became a new creation, and the delightful piano number *Do the Boogie*, is one of those rare informal bits which usually doesn't get on a record. The brooding *California Showers* was recorded one rainy afternoon at his cousin's house in Oakland—it had been raining for weeks, it was almost like the weather in Houston—and this number represents that part of Lightnin's personality and artistry which is often covered up in front of an audience—the lonely blues man by himself. Here is Lightnin' Hopkins, perhaps the greatest creative blues singer the world will ever hear.

CHRIS A. STRACHWITZ



MEET YOU AT THE CHICKEN SHACK

ONCE WAS A GAMBLER

SPEEDIN' BOOGIE

ICE STORM BLUES

CALIFORNIA SHOWERS

BURNIN' IN L.A.

DO THE BOOGIE

BALD HEADED WOMAN

GOIN' OUT

Personnel: Lightning Hopkins -- vocals, guitar, and piano

MEET YOU AT THE CHICKEN SHACK & ICE STORM BLUES: Spider Kilpatrick — drums; Houston, Tex., Jan. 23, 1962

CALIFORNIA SHOWERS: Berkeley, Ca. December 2, 1961

All other titles:

Gino Landry — bass; Victor Leonard — drums; Berkeley, Calif. November 26, 1961.

Below left: at a jook joint in Houston with drummer L. C. Williams (1960). Below right: with friends in Houston—left to right: "Spider" Kilpatrick, "Long Gone" Miles, L. C. Williams, and Lightnin'. All photos: Arhoolie Archives.



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