

Until only a few months before making these recordings, Sam Lightnin' Hopkins knew of England only vaguely as a place "over across that water" ... a place he'd heard of thru friends who'd visited there while in the army.

He was startled and dubious when I told him that some of the greatest enthusiasm for the blues was centred in places "over across that water". He was flattered to learn that his old recordings were prized collector's items in European nations. And finally his skepticism abated as I showed him letters and published comments from Paul Oliver, Yannick Bruynoghe, Tony Standish, Derrick Stewart-Baxter, and Albert McCarthy.

Previously he had more or less believed, and operated in terms of his belief, that his music had a following only in its native environment, the East Texas "Piney Woods" and the Negro wards of Houston. Certainly it is here that his raw, deeply-rooted lore and unique personalization of the blues has made its greatest impact and earned him the special kind of fame and affection that comes not thru publicity but thru personal encounter and word of mouth celebration. Among the rural-bred people who now dwell in the city working as longshoremen, truck drivers, and yardmen, Lightnin' is regarded as a personal friend, a spokesman for their own joy, bad luck, and trouble. They have granted him a royal position: Lightnin' Hopkins occupies the throne vacated by Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Thruout the South one encounters blues singers who mimic, alternately, Blind Lemon's "Black Snake Moan" and Lightnin's "Short Haired Woman". More than critical ovation, the number of Lightnin's imitators indicate his rank among the blues minstrels who have come wandering out of the Piney Woods and the river bottoms of the South. (A recording artist by the name of "Lightnin Slim" is but one of several that have made such imitations into a commercial enterprise).

Born in 1912 in Leon County, Texas .. lying between the Brazos and Trinity rivers in central East Texas ... Lightnin' came under the influence of Blind Lemon at an early age. Several years before he began recording, Blind Lemon's fame was sufficient to make his visit to any area a major event. Sinful singers and sanctified singers alike used to congregate at the Baptist Church association meetings and at one such event in Buffalo, Texas, Lightnin' began "complimenting" the master.

Joel Hopkins, an elder brother who travelled the South with tent shows and medicine caravans, supplied Lightnin's first guitar. Churches which he attended as a youngster gave him access to the piano and the organ (Lightnin' has recorded the blues with both these instruments in recent years). His cohorts were Lonnie Johnson and Texas Alexander. And for a time Lightnin' accompanied Alexander, one of the early blues recording artists.

From his early teens, Lightnin' has made his way in the world with his voice and his guitar, following in the tradition of great wandering blues minstrels.

Unlike many of his predecessors, Lightnin' is gifted with a dramatic sense of performance ... a flow of posturing and animation which he developed on the "concert stage" of Houston street corners, charming a circle of onlookers to coax their coins into his pocket. According to his fleeting moods he is a clown .. twirling his guitar at the height of a boogie, dancing out counter-rhythms, and mocking the by-standers with sly humor .. or a tragic figure characterized in autobiographical songs telling of his women, gambling, drink, and the long weariness of "begging up and down the streets ....."

..... "The Rooster Crowed In England"

Among his finest gifts is a knack for a kind of first person, present tense narrative in which the inagings of his mind are given play-by-play description. At times he merely talks while the guitar sets the mood and he often interrupts a song with a versed patter offering advice or drawing a moral. Many of his songs are spontaneous improvisations, made and forgotten in the time he takes to sing them. To the listener he offers a total characterisation of himself and his idiom. The startling impact of his personality reaches much farther than the fans and aficionados of the blues.

But in recent years Lightnin' has found himself in a paradoxical situation. He no longer "begs up and down the street". Instead, with a drummer and an amplified guitar, he plays at neighborhood dance halls scattered over Houston. These jook joints supply him with a steady income while the noise and constant uproar rob him of the intimacy and concentrated attention of a listening audience. Most of his 200 previous recordings have, at the bidding of recording supervisors thinking in terms of the jukebox trade, cast him in this same misrepresenting light. Confined by strict tempos, his abilities overwhelmed by echo chambers and thudding drummers, Lightnin's personality has nonetheless shown forth even with the most raucous accompaniment.

He acutely misses the immediate contact of playing for a circle of friends on a street corner but, understandably, refuses to go back working for hand-outs.

On July 20, 1959 I walked onstage at the Alley Theater and introduced Lightnin' to an audience gathered for the Houston Folklore Group's annual Hootenanny. I was apprehensive because I knew the audience had come to hear the familiar ballads and songs popularized by book-trained singers. Here, in its habitat, there has never been any general interest in the blues. Lightnin' was equally apprehensive for he'd never before appeared at a formal concert and had only rarely sung for a predominately white audience.

Yet within seconds of the time he came out to prop up his foot by me and begin "That Mean Old Twister", he'd begun to steal the show. By the time he sang "The Shack Where I Was Living Really Rocked But It Never Fell" the audience was hanging on every nuance of his voice. When his faced stretched in pain, the guitar ringing bitterly, as he cried "Lord! ... turn your twister the other way!" the theater filled with the taunt gasp of an audience caught and held in the grasp of a single man.

He went on to songs detailing his days on the chain gang, his sex life, and hard times .. he slapped the audience with the raw stuff of folk music and they roared approval. Lightnin's unique expression had found a new medium.

This album was prepared with the frank intention of arousing interest among the public and agencies who govern the European concert halls.

In this group, as in all his songs, Lightnin' comes to grips with matters which momentarily strike his attention. "Blues For Queen Elizabeth" demonstrates his sudden improvisation on a topical theme; "Back to Arkansas" is his impression of a current juke box hit by Ray Charles which Lightnin' remakes in his own image; in "Children's Boogie" his imagination cheekles to itself; "Black Snake" derives from one of the great symbolic figures of his culture and "Begging Up And Down The Street" is a literal, autobiographical fact.