

# Lightnin' Hopkins

**Samuel John "Lightnin'" Hopkins** (March 15, 1912 – January 30, 1982) was an American country blues singer, songwriter, guitarist, and occasional pianist, from Centerville, Texas. *Rolling Stone* magazine ranked him number 71 on its list of the 100 greatest guitarists of all time.

The musicologist Robert "Mack" McCormick opined that Hopkins is "the embodiment of the jazz-and-poetry spirit, representing its ancient form in the single creator whose words and music are one act".

## Life

Hopkins was born in Centerville, Texas, and as a child was immersed in the sounds of the blues. He developed a deep appreciation for this music at the age of 8, when he met Blind Lemon Jefferson at a church picnic in Buffalo, Texas. That day, Hopkins felt the blues was "in him". He went on to learn from his older (distant) cousin, the country blues singer Alger "Texas" Alexander. (Hopkins had another cousin, the Texas electric blues guitarist Frankie Lee Sims, with whom he later recorded.) Hopkins began accompanying Jefferson on guitar at informal church gatherings. Jefferson reputedly never let anyone play with him except young Hopkins, and Hopkins learned much from Jefferson at these gatherings.

In the mid-1930s, Hopkins was sent to Houston County Prison Farm; the offense for which he was imprisoned is unknown. In the late 1930s, he moved to Houston with Alexander in an unsuccessful attempt to break into the music scene there. By the early 1940s, he was back in Centerville, working as a farm hand.

Hopkins took a second shot at Houston in 1946. While singing on Dowling Street in Houston's Third Ward (which would become his home base), he was discovered by Lola Anne Cullum of Aladdin Records, based in Los Angeles. She convinced Hopkins to travel to Los Angeles, where he accompanied the pianist Wilson Smith. The duo recorded twelve tracks in their first sessions in 1946. An Aladdin executive decided the pair needed more dynamism in their names and dubbed Hopkins "Lightnin'" and Wilson "Thunder".

Gold Star promotional photograph, 1948

Hopkins recorded more sides for Aladdin in 1947. He returned to Houston and began recording for Gold Star Records. In the late 1940s and 1950s he rarely performed outside Texas, only occasionally traveling to the Midwest and the East for recording sessions and concert appearances. It has been estimated that he recorded between eight hundred and a thousand songs in his career. He performed regularly at nightclubs in and around Houston, particularly on Dowling Street, where he had been discovered by Aladdin. He recorded the hit records "T-Model Blues" and "Tim Moore's Farm" at SugarHill Recording Studios in Houston. By the mid- to late 1950s, his prodigious output of high-quality recordings had gained him a following among African Americans and blues aficionados.

In 1959, the blues researcher Mack McCormick contacted Hopkins, hoping to bring him to the attention of a broader musical audience engaged in the folk revival. McCormick presented Hopkins to integrated audiences first in Houston and then in California. He made his debut at

Carnegie Hall on October 14, 1960, alongside Joan Baez and Pete Seeger, performing the spiritual "Mary Don't You Weep". In 1960, he signed with Tradition Records. The recordings which followed included his song "Mojo Hand" in 1960.

In 1968, Hopkins recorded the album *Free Form Patterns*, backed by the rhythm section of the psychedelic rock band 13th Floor Elevators. Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, he released one or sometimes two albums a year and toured, playing at major folk music festivals and at folk clubs and on college campuses in the U.S. and internationally. He toured extensively in the United States and played a six-city tour of Japan in 1978.

Hopkins was Houston's poet-in-residence for 35 years. He recorded more albums than any other bluesman.

Hopkins died of esophageal cancer in Houston on January 30, 1982, at the age of 69. His obituary in the *New York Times* described him as "one of the great country blues singers and perhaps the greatest single influence on rock guitar players."

His Gibson J-160e "hollowbox" is on display at the Rock Hall of Fame in Cleveland, and his Guild Starfire at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in DC, both on loan from the Joe Kessler collection.

## Musical style

Hopkins's style was born from spending many hours playing informally without a backing band. His distinctive fingerstyle technique often included playing, in effect, bass, rhythm, lead, and percussion at the same time. He played both "alternating" and "monotonic" bass styles incorporating imaginative, often chromatic turnarounds and single-note lead lines. Tapping or slapping the body of his guitar added rhythmic accompaniment.

Much of Hopkins's music follows the standard 12-bar blues template, but his phrasing was free and loose. Many of his songs were in the talking blues style, but he was a powerful and confident singer. Lyrically, his songs expressed the problems of life in the segregated South, bad luck in love and other subjects common in the blues idiom. He dealt with these subjects with humor and good nature. Many of his songs are filled with double entendres, and he was known for his humorous introductions to songs.

Some of his songs were of warning and sour prediction, such as "Fast Life Woman":

You may see a fast life woman sittin' round a whiskey joint,  
Yes, you know, she'll be sittin' there smilin',  
'Cause she knows some man gonna buy her half a pint,  
Take it easy, fast life woman, 'cause you ain't gon' live always...

## References in popular culture

A statue of Hopkins sits in Crockett, Texas.

Hopkins is mentioned in Erykah Badu's 2010 "Window Seat": "I don't want to time-travel no more, I want to be here. On this porch I'm rockin', back and forth like Lightnin' Hopkins."

R.E.M. included the song "Lightnin' Hopkins" on their 1987 album *Document*.

Hopkins's song "Back to New Orleans (Baby Please Don't Go)" was performed by the fictional country singer Cherlene in the FX television comedy *Archer* (season 5, episode 1).

## SONNY TERRY & BROWNIE MCGHEE

Blind harp wizard Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, a spectacular guitar picker, had a 35-year-long partnership that helped to define Folk/Blues. Their Piedmont style Blues has a very different feel to Delta Blues and its effect on modern music has a very different genesis to the route through Chicago that gave us Blues-rock. New York was the focal point for this genre to spread to the world and when this process was getting started, nobody was busier in the studio, on stage and on tour than Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Their double-act took them to worldwide fame but they started and ended their careers as solo artists.

### Sonny Terry. (1911-1986)

Saunders Terrell was born in Greensboro NC but he wasn't born blind; he lost his sight in two separate accidents, one when he was 5 and the other when he was 16. His father played the harp, mainly jigs and reels at family parties, and he taught his son the rudiments of the instrument so he could at least earn a little money. In 1934, the young Sonny was busking on street-corners in nearby Durham when he met and befriended guitarist Blind Boy Fuller. They played together nearly every day and Sonny was soon persuaded to move to Durham. He had developed an energetic style of playing, with lots of breathy whoops, snorts and cries, in the manner of country harp players like DeFord Bailey, and a predominance of piercing high notes. He later called his style "whoopin'". In 1937, Fuller had a recording date in New York and he took Sonny along to Vocalion studios to play on the session. The following year, John Hammond invited Fuller to play at the 'Spirituals to Swing' celebration of black music at Carnegie Hall, but he was apparently in jail for a shooting offence, so Sonny played instead, blowing his 'Mountain Blues'. Returning to Durham, Sonny met the man who was to become his long term playing partner, Brownie McGhee.

### Brownie McGhee. (1915-1996)

Walter McGhee was born and raised in Knoxville TN and when he contracted polio, his brother Granville (or 'Stick') would push him round in a cart. When he was able to walk again, Brownie dropped out of school to play guitar with his father's group, The Golden Voices Gospel Quartet. He took up the life of a wandering Bluesman, developing a fine finger-picking style in the manner of his hero Blind Boy Fuller. Brownie decided to go to Durham to meet Fuller and, of course, met Sonny too. Fuller's manager JD Long was impressed with Brownie's playing and arranged for him to record

for the Okeh label in Chicago in 1940. JD also encouraged him to play with Sonny when Fuller was not available, so when Blind Boy Fuller died from blood-poisoning in 1941, the pair's response was to record Sonny's song, 'The Death of Blind Boy Fuller'. Brownie was even persuaded to appear as Blind Boy Fuller II for a while, but he didn't want a career impersonating his mentor. Sonny and Brownie had formed a solid working partnership so they decided to get out of Carolina, and moved to New York together in 1941.

## Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee.

There was an influx of Blues players into New York just after WWII ended, and they found a flourishing club scene for jazz, boogie-woogie, blues and folk music. Sonny and Brownie, Rev. Gary Davis and Josh White all found a welcome in the left-leaning, anti-racist bohemian life of the metropolis, where they joined Woodie Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Lead Belly, Lee Hays and Pete Seeger in an artistic mix of poets, writers and actors. This activist New York ethos may also have sparked the protest songs of the 50s; Bob Dylan and the cultural revolution of the 60s; Punk in the 70s and arguably Rap in the 90s. In those early days Sonny and Brownie often played and recorded together, but they also had separate careers. Both went on stage as actors; Sonny spent two years in a production of 'Finnegan's Rainbow' and Brownie spent even longer in Tennessee Williams' 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'. Brownie, often using an alias, showed stunning versatility as a guitarist, recording some mean electric Blues for the Savoy label, where he had a big R&B hit with 'My Fault' in 1948, and recorded many sensitive folk songs, sometimes aided by his brother 'Stick'. Sonny meanwhile, had his own band, The Night Owls and also cut tracks with 'Stick', as well as using Lightnin' Hopkins and other session guitarists, to leave a legacy of sparkling harmonica Blues, especially his work for the Capitol and Gotham labels.

By the late 50s there was a huge demand for folk/blues in the clubs around the East coast and as their fame as a double act grew and as record sales climbed steeply, Sonny and Brownie became national household names. They cut a gospel album in Oakland CA in 1957, then toured Britain and recorded an album in London the following year, to great acclaim. TV appearances took them into the world mainstream and they were soon issuing a studio album or live set every few months. They covered a lot of ground with these recordings; they had learned a lot of Piedmont Blues as young men and also gave their interpretations of many other Blues players' best songs, as well as forays into other styles. The Festival movement loved them for their wide repertoire of folk, blues, gospel and protest songs, and they toured the world for the whole of the 60s as a headline attraction. The sight of the tall man with a heavy limp leading the small blind man on stage was seen on five continents. Despite their affable stage act, the two men did not get along too well personally as the years went by. On the 1973 album 'Sonny and Brownie' with John Mayall and John Hammond Jr. they banter like old friends, but outside the studio they would barely talk. It finally came to the point where they would be billed together, but Sonny would play with another guitarist and then Brownie would do a solo set. Thus the affair came to a messy end at some indeterminate time in the late 70s.