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Mojo Hand: The Life And Music Of Lightnin' Hopkins (Brad And Michele Moore Roots Music)



Synopsis

In a career that took him from the cotton fields of East Texas to the concert stage at Carnegie Hall and beyond, Lightnin' Hopkins became one of America's greatest bluesmen, renowned for songs whose topics effortlessly ranged from his African American roots to space exploration, the Vietnam War, and lesbianism, performed in a unique, eccentric, and spontaneous style of guitar playing that inspired a whole generation of rock guitarists. Hopkins's music directly and indirectly influenced an amazing range of artists, including Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Tom Waits, and Bob Dylan, as well as bands such as the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and ZZ Top, with whom Hopkins performed. *Mojo Hand* follows Lightnin' Hopkins's life and music from the acoustic country blues that he began performing in childhood, through the rise of 1950s rock and roll, which nearly derailed his career, to his reinvention and international success as a pioneer of electric folk blues from the 1960s to the 1980s. The authors draw on 130 vivid oral histories, as well as extensive archival and secondary sources, to provide the fullest account available of the development of Hopkins's music; his idiosyncratic business practices, such as shunning professional bookers, managers, and publicists; and his durable and indelible influence on modern roots, blues, rock and roll, singer-songwriter, and folk music. *Mojo Hand* celebrates the spirit and style, intelligence and wit, and confounding musical mystique of a bluesman who shaped modern American music like no one else.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review Sam O'Lightnin' Hopkins was determined to escape the toil and misery of sharecropping in Jim Crow-era East Texas, and his innate gift for music was the ticket out. He started young, quickly developing his complex, signature style of blues guitar. His ability to play rhythm and lead simultaneously, an unhitched intensity and speed, and impishly witty lyrics made him one of the most important bluesmen of the twentieth century, while his refusal to trust record-industry professionals made for a roller-coaster career. Music journalist O'Brien assiduously combed archives public and private and conducted 130 interviews, then Ensminger stepped in to help after O'Brien became ill with the cancer that took his life. The result is a comprehensively detailed and provocative biography brimming with vivid oral history, in which Hopkins comes into focus as a wry, tough, and prickly man, always sharply dressed and happiest playing in small clubs in his Houston neighborhood, gambling, or fishing, even though he thrilled audiences at Carnegie Hall and around the world. Extensive, anecdotal coverage of gigs and recording sessions is balanced with incisive analysis of racial inequities in American society and the music business, Hopkins' tremendous influence on white rock musicians, and how his music built bridges between cultures and people, politics and poetry, humor and humanism.

--Donna Seaman

"Mojo Hand covers all the pivotal moments in his fascinating life through narrative punctuated with large, unwieldy chunks of oral history – both from first and secondary sources. Though thoroughly researched, as befits its genesis as the late Tim O'Brien's dissertation for the University of Houston, it turns Hopkins' story into an excellent reference tool rather than a thrilling page turner." (Mojo 2013-09-01)"The biography maintains a focus centered on Lightnin' and his music. He has crafted a fascinating, well-researched look at a true blues legend, and helps us understand the social environment that created such powerful music." (Crossroads Blues Society of Northern Illinois 2013-08-02)

As a lifelong Lightnin' fan, I certainly was very excited about this newest work. While the book is adequately written & presented, I found the author(s) to be generally very unfamiliar with the lifestyle, music & mannerisms of Bluesmen & Southern culture. Things that are just part of the "holistic" Southern Blues experience are deemed "notable" & dryly presented as behavioral quirks within this text. I found this to be somewhat unusual, since biographies this specific are typically crafted by someone very knowledgeable & inspired by the nuances of the subject. That being said, the book is largely well researched, and has a veritable wealth of information on Lightnin's transition

into the world of young aspiring white folkies & aspiring musicians . I loved this, particularly the specifics on the Houston "underground" Blues-Rock scene that was so formative in the early sixties. After reading, I passed this book onto a close friend in Texas...one who knew Lightnin' personally, and had gigged behind him in Houston on several occasions. My friend was overjoyed with the details of Lightnin's Houston doings', and it brought back vivid & joyous memories of this wonderful seminal Bluesman for him. There's a lot to be said for that...

Wasn't spectacularly well written but it was written well enough to keep me interested and if you're a lover of the blues and someone who's genuinely interested in the lives of the masters who created it you'll probably enjoy it too!

great

For a university press, I would have expected better. There are facts repeated more than once. Also, the book says that The Little Sandy Review was founded by Barry Hansen. He worked on it later, but it was founded by Paul Nelson. Among the people who appeared at the Ash Grove in LA, one was listed as Buddy Travis. It should have been the duo of Bud & Travis. Let's get those fact checkers working. Perhaps for these & other reasons there are no statements on the back cover by any reviewers.

Books about Lightning Hopkins are hard to find. As far as I know, there are only two, this being the most recent. What I find puzzling is why O'Brien--or anyone else--is interested in Lightning's biography. True, it's hard to understand why any musician would ever be as equally fascinating as his music, excepting sacred monsters like Wagner, but surely what a blues lover wants to know about is Lightning's music. And while O'Brien includes enough about his recordings to make this book worthwhile, mostly it's about Lightning's miserable life. Let's face it--Lightning was a wastrel, a street guy who didn't give a hoot about anything except drinking, gambling, and ignoring any demands by relatives or friends that didn't suit his vagabond life. If he didn't have a musical gift, he would never have been heard of outside his neighborhood in Houston. What would have been preferable to his "biography" would have been some information about his influences. For example, was his very distinctive guitar style derived from any earlier Texas players? Vague references to Blind Lemon aren't helpful: Lemon played an almost entirely different style, more accomplished and virtuoso than Lightning, playing alternating runs on the bass and treble strings, finger-picking,

breaking up the rhythm to great effect, whereas Lightning from the start thumps the bass string of the chord he's playing and picks out runs on the treble with his index finger, never varying the rhythm except playing sometimes in a fast tempo, sometimes in a slow one. Don't misunderstand: I love Lightning's playing. I can listen to five cuts in a row that begin with Lightning sliding down to an E chord on the fifth fret and using basically the same slow blues licks without feeling even slightly bored. But where did this style come from? Did he make it up? (I admit I've never heard any earlier players who sound like him, but my knowledge of Texas blues recordings of the 1920s-30s is modest.) Also, while we're told that Lightning learned a lot of his blues from Texas Alexander, we don't hear anything further about his vocal influences. Who were they? A discussion of what happened when Lightning went from being a solo performer on his Aladdin, Gold Star, and Modern recordings to a succession of sides with Donald Cook on bass and usually a drummer would be worth reading. Myself, I think this was a negative because Lightning no longer had to rely on some of his solo techniques and let the rhythm do the work for him. Perfectly legitimate, of course, but did it allow him to become less creative and to "phone in" some of his performances? Was Lightning's style improved by using a heavily amplified electric guitar? People who think HOPKINS SKY HOP on Herald is one of his best instrumentals ought to ask themselves what it would sound like played on an acoustic or a lightly amplified instrument. What's Lightning's best side? I'd nominate FAST LIFE WOMAN, but the vocal on HELLO, CENTRAL is amazingly poignant. Much more poignant than Lightning's bio, so I hope the next writer who chooses him for a subject concentrates on his music and spares us the details of his uninteresting life.

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