

Nighthawk, Robert

Robert Nighthawk (Nov. 30, 1909, Helena, AR-November 5, 1967, Helena, Ar) was one of three children of the musically-inclined Ned and Mattie McCollum. Nighthawk sometimes performed with guitarist Percy, a man claimed to be his brother, and Joe Willie Wilkins' one-time wife Margaret was said to be Nighthawk's sister but, according to Nighthawk biographer Jeff Harris, neither was biological kin. Nighthawk learned the harmonica from Louisiana musician Johnny (or Eddie) Jones in 1924. As a youth, Nighthawk began his rambling; he never stopped.

Performing various agricultural jobs by day and playing music at night, Nighthawk was working the Hollandale, MS area in 1931 when he learned guitar from Houston Stackhouse. Stackhouse, who claimed to be Nighthawk's cousin, was a multi-instrumentalist who had learned to play guitar from fellow Crystal Springs natives, Tommy Johnson and his brothers. It is their style featuring rhythmically sophisticated Delta guitar with the incorporation of falsetto yodels, that Stackhouse conveyed to Nighthawk. Nighthawk's recorded repertoire included several Tommy Johnson songs.

Nighthawk's travels took him throughout the Delta and beyond where he performed with Sonny Boy (John Lee) Williamson, Sleepy John Estes, Yank Rachel, Hammie Nixon, Big Joe Williams, Will Shade, John Lee Hooker, and others. He was playing guitar in the orchestra of the Dan Hildrege Show in East St. Louis, in the early thirties, when he met one-time girlfriend, singer and dancer Little Laura Dukes from Memphis, teaching her to play the ukulele.

Nighthawk was well known in the lower South so that, in 1935, after becoming involved in a shooting, he fled north to St. Louis to escape prosecution. There he adopted his mother's maiden name and became Robert Lee McCoy.

Nighthawk first recorded (though never released) accompanying pianist Jack Newman in October 1936. In St. Louis, he worked regularly with Sonny Boy Williamson and Big Joe Williams and they accompanied him on his first recording session as a leader, in Chicago on May 5, 1937 (Bluebird). Included in the six records he cut was his composition "Prowling Night-Hawk"; years later he adopted it as his surname. Twenty-one songs were released as by Robert Lee McCoy or Rambling Bob, by Bluebird between May 1937 and December 1938. In June 1940, in Chicago, Nighthawk recorded four songs for Decca. On these records, released as by "Peetie's Boy"—a reference to St. Louis musician Peetie Wheatstraw—Nighthawk was joined by vocalist Ann Sortier.

During the late thirties and early forties, Nighthawk frequently recorded as accompanist, playing guitar and/or harmonica, behind Sonny Boy Williamson, Big Joe Williams, Sleepy John Estes, Walter Davis, Speckled Red, Henry Townsend, Peetie Wheatstraw, and others.

Although still a rambler, Nighthawk moved his base of operations to Chicago in 1940. It was apparently during this time that Nighthawk came under the influence of slide guitar master Tampa Red; adding some of his songs to his repertoire and blending Red's smoother, more delicate slide style with that of the Crystal Springs sound and creating the distinctive single-string slide playing for which Nighthawk is famous.

In 1942, Nighthawk was back home in Helena where he landed a spot on radio station KFFA advertising Bright Star Flour. Sometimes accompanied by guitarist Joe Willie Wilkins and pianist Pinetop Perkins and, by 1946, by his teacher (and later student) Houston Stackhouse. During the forties, Nighthawk and Stackhouse tutored the young Earl Hooker on guitar.

1948 found Nighthawk, now playing electric guitar, in Chicago, where his old friend Muddy

Waters—himself influenced by Nighthawk’s slide innovations—helped arrange a recording session for the Chess brothers. This session, resulted in one release and another one, in 1949, produced an Aristocrat single featuring two Nighthawk standards: “Black Angel Blues” and “Annie Lee Blues,” both songs previously recorded by Tampa Red. Following a third Chess session and second Aristocrat single in 1950, Nighthawk recorded (1951-1952) eleven numbers for the United and States labels. His post-war popularity was based on these late forties-early fifties recordings; Nighthawk did not record again until 1964.

Nighthawk returned to the Helena/Friar’s Point area and continued rambling, following the crops down to Florida, or working his way north to visit old friends and haunts in St. Louis or Chicago. Reports from his contemporaries indicate that he played regularly throughout the Delta region, often performing with his son Sam Carr on drums and Frank Frost on harmonica.

In 1964, Nighthawk made one of his infrequent trips to Chicago. That year he recorded for Decca, Chess, and Testament, and participated in a documentary for Swedish radio. He was also recorded live, with a small combo on Maxwell Street—partially released on LP in 1979 and in the 1965 documentary *And This Is Free* (1995).

Nighthawk, by 1965, was back in the Helena area, broadcasting over KFFA and playing local gigs. His last recordings in the company of Houston Stackhouse, James “Peck” Curtis, and Carey Mason were made in the field, in 1967 in Dundee, Mississippi, by George Mitchell. In poor health at the time, he died several months later on November 5. Nighthawk told friends that his illness was the result of having been either poisoned or conjured. The official cause of death was congestive heart failure. He was buried in Helena’s Magnolia Cemetery.

Nighthawk entered many relationships with women and reportedly had several children. By his first wife Mary Griffen he had two children, Ludie and musician Sam Carr. With another wife, drummer Hazel Momon, he had three children: Geni, Robert, and Marianne.

The late Pete Welding described Nighthawk’s “slide work” as “simply masterful—delicate, smooth, perfectly controlled, full of sustained invention.” His singing, whether mournful or jubilant, was the perfect accompaniment to his playing and together they created a unique feel and tone that only the greatest artists achieve. Pinetop Perkins said: “Nobody else could play a slide like him. They think they can but they can’t. . . It’s wailin’ man.” Nighthawk’s influence is evident in the playing of nearly every postwar slide guitarist as well as many, including B.B. King, who do not play in the slide style.

References and Further Reading:

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