

ROBERT NIGHTHAWK

BY—
MIKE LEADBITTER



As most readers will probably realize, I have long been fascinated with the Delta blues-scene of post-war years. Since the publication of DELTA COUNTRY BLUES I have been chasing as many leads as I can in an attempt to discover more before it is too late. A major difficulty has been the fact that it is almost too late for proper research; as most of the important figures have died, one must rely on second-hand information. Recent digging by James La Rocca, John Broven, Steve LaVere and Gayle Wardlow has been of tremendous help and my own personal research has revealed much, including new facts on Robert Nighthawk, which I am pleased to present here. ml

ROBERT NIGHTHAWK - a rare photo courtesy of Sam Carr.

Our only real knowledge concerning Robert Nighthawk was provided by Don Kent, back in March 1967. George Mitchell was the last collector to see him alive, and his recently published book provides no details of their meeting. I know of nobody who interviewed Nighthawk in depth during his brief 'rediscovery' in 1964 and, considering how important Robert's memories were, this oversight is hard to understand. I started my research with Don's article to guide me.

I knew that Nighthawk was living in Dundee when George Mitchell contacted him, so I wrote to the Board of Health in Jackson, Mississippi, in the hope that they could trace a death certificate. They were very helpful, which was a surprise, for I could provide no date of death for them to work on, but came up with nothing. I next tried the Health Board in Little Rock, assuming that the death must have occurred in Helena if not Dundee. I was right, and the Certificate duly arrived. From it I learned that the personal details were supplied by a Sam Carr from Dundee. On a hunch I wrote to Sam, asking if he could tell me more and if by any chance he was Frank Frost's drummer...

My luck held, Sam not only answered, but said HE WAS NIGHTHAWK'S SON and he was indeed the drummer with Frank. The ensuing correspondence led to the following story.

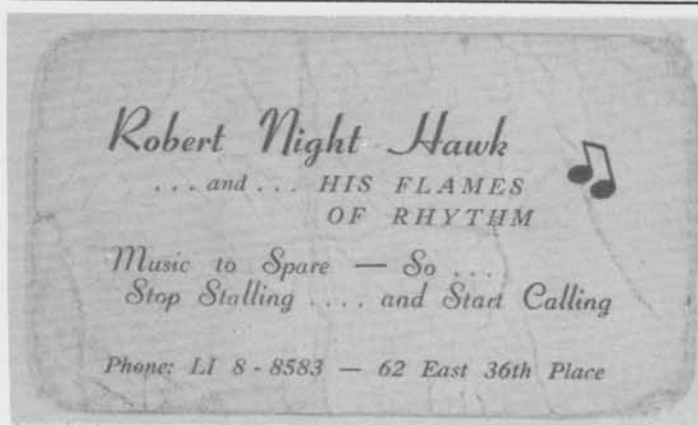
Robert Nighthawk was born at Helena, Arkansas on November 30th 1909. His real name was Robert Lee McCollum, and he was raised in a farming community. Nothing can be discovered about his early days but he began the rambling, which continued throughout his life, as a teenager. In 1924 when he was 14 years old, he met a man named Eddie Jones in Louisiana who taught him to play the harmonica. Nighthawk began to sing and play blues, wandering around the Delta, learning more from other musicians, and working as a farmer from time to time.

He did not think about guitars until he was 21 or 22. His interest was aroused when he met Houston Stackhouse at Hollandale, Mississippi. The meeting led to friendship and guitar lessons, and from there on Nighthawk played either harmonica or guitar as required, or reputedly, would play both at once using a rack. At a time when people like Robert Johnson,

Wolf, Elmore James and Robert Junior Lockwood were starting out, Nighthawk became a semi-professional bluesman.

In the early thirties Nighthawk travelled extensively through the South, spending time around Southern Tennessee and moving as far North as the Missouri border, meeting men such as Will Shade, John Estes and Patton. This itinerant existence came to an end around 1935, when Robert found himself in 'deep trouble' and left the South, assuming his mother's maiden name of McCoy. From St. Louis he went to Chicago and on October 23, 1936 recorded for Vocalion with Jack Newman. From 1937 to 1940 he commuted between East St. Louis and Chicago, enjoying a fairly successful career as a Bluebird recording artist and house musician. He recorded under the various names of Robert Lee McCoy, Lee McCoy, Ramblin' Bob and Peetie's Boy and on sessions switched guitar and harmonica to suit the artist he was backing.

Most of these early performances are not too interesting when compared with what was to come, but one, featuring slide-guitar for the first time, was "Friar's Point Blues", the real highlight of those early days. It has been said that Stackhouse taught Nighthawk to play slide, but I am sure he adopted this style under the influence of Tampa Red, an artist that he must have met many times in Chicago :



ROBERT'S VISITING CARD. HE KEPT THE THEME TO THE END.....

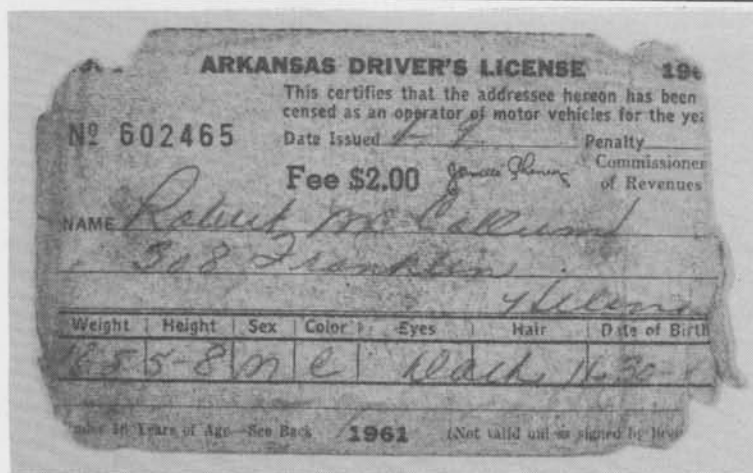
"Babe, I know if you love me,
You won't treat me right, (twice)
If you do good in the day,
You gonna do wrong at night...

Still, I ain't gonna worry,
And I ain't gonna raise no sand,
I'm going back to Friars Point,
Down in sweet ole Dixie Land."

Sam Carr says, "He loved Helena and his guitar" and Nighthawk suddenly returned there, during a time when his people were migrating north. Back in Arkansas he found he was forgotten as a musician, but that his song "Prowling Nighthawk" was remembered. Once again he changed his name, and this time to suit his audience. He became Robert Nighthawk, developing a new sound, based on his slide-guitar playing

Somehow he avoided the draft and from 1942 to 1948 resided at 308½ Franklin Street in Helena. "King Biscuit Time" was the big thing in Helena at the time, with Sonny Boy Williamson dominating the local, very wide-open scene. Work was plentiful in West Helena with its many bars and gambling joints so, establishing himself as a popular attraction, Nighthawk started broadcasting on KFFA for a flour company called "Star Bright", doing his best to rival Sonny Boy.

When he came back from Chicago, Robert brought a band with him; 'Bunt' played second guitar, Albert Davis played bass and a certain Georgia Joe on drums. With this trio Nighthawk began to tour the Delta again, spending time in Clarksdale and Osceola, Arkansas. When Joe went back to Georgia,



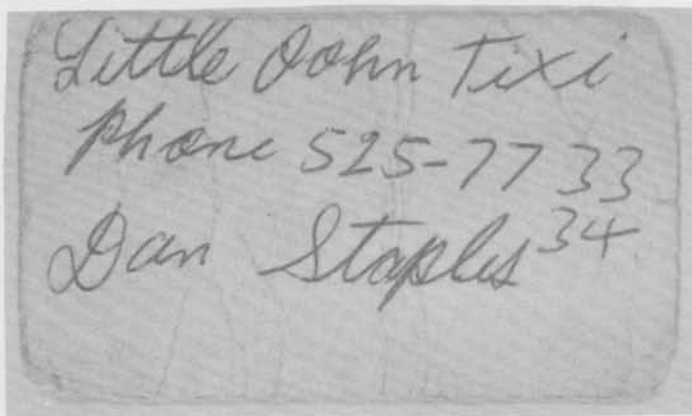
ROBERT NIGHTHAWK'S ARKANSAS DRIVER'S LICENSE, TAKEN OUT IN HIS REAL NAME OF ROBERT MCCOLLUM. For the record, the reverse, which lists any court convictions, endorsements, violations etc. is clean.

Kansas City Red (Arthur Lee Stevenson) took over the drums. Pinetop Perkins played piano for a long spell and has fond memories of the KFFA days as he was involved with both Nighthawk and Sonny Boy. It is incredible to think that around 1944, not only were these two advertising flour on KFFA, but there was another rival show, sponsored by Mother's Best Flour, which featured Robert Junior Lockwood! Flour certainly helped the blues and Nighthawk, but the competition must have been terrific.

Nighthawk must have been very popular and his influence vast, for Elmore James, Earl Hooker and Muddy Waters all learned from him, all being impressed by his smooth, almost faultless slide-guitar playing. In fact it was Muddy who got Nighthawk back in

are both remembered as pianists with the Nighthawks. Though Robert never stayed away from Helena too long, he lived in many towns during the early '50s, at the height of his career...among these were Paducah, Kentucky; Sikeston, Missouri; Osceola, Cairo, Illinois; and East Saint Louis. From 1951-53 he was under contract to the United/States labels recording his highly-rated "The Moon is Rising" and the Tommy Johnson number "Maggie Campbell", but from 1954 on he was abandoned by the commercial record companies. Nighthawk's blues didn't fit in with the rapidly changing tastes in R&B, so he took them back home to Helena...

For a decade he was based in the Helena, Friars Point, Dundee area, only taking to road when bookings were scarce. He would go north to St. Louis and Chicago or work his way down to Florida for the fruit-picking season. Sam Carr states that he was able to earn his living from entertainment during this time, so he obviously retained his popularity. Sam was drumming for him and they'd use any other musician that they could get to fill dates - however, things must have got tougher by the sixties, for in 1964 Nighthawk was back in Chicago trying to re-establish himself once more.



Little John Tixi
Phone 525-7733
Dan Staples³⁴

This writing appears on the back of Robert Nighthawk's visiting card - small clues like this and death certificate data can prove useful!

the studio thanks to a solid association with the growing Aristocrat label. In 1948 Nighthawk came North to record for the label, returning again in 1949 and 1950 with Ernest Lane and Pinetop Perkins to help him out on sessions that produced several memorable numbers. Of these, "Black Angel Blues", a Tampa Red number, was the most successful, especially in the South where a young D-J named B. B. King not only played it, but re-recorded it later as "Sweet Little Angel". This beautiful song could have been a real hit, but many radio stations were reluctant to feature it because of the words "black angel", and Aristocrat were unable to tap the record's potential.

These records created a sudden demand for Robert Nighthawk and His Nighthawks Band. He began to spend most of his life on the road as well as broadcasting regularly, on WROX at Clarksdale, WDIA in Memphis and a long-forgotten station in Osceola. Pinetop Perkins continued to play with him from time to time, but Ernest Lane and Ike Turner

Chicago must have been very frustrating. In spite of record sessions for Willie Dixon and Pete Welding, gigs arranged by the collector community, and a trip to Canada, Robert spent much of his time playing on Maxwell Street or in the small West Side clubs, earning only a few dollars. He was also ill, and the struggle for a living could not have helped. The 1964 recordings prove that he was still in top form; his vocals sounding better than ever before. Soon after recording for Testament he returned South for the last time.

From 1965-1967, Nighthawk never moved far from Helena. Sam Carr was running the Nighthawks Band with a friend from Lula, Frank Frost, and they'd back Nighthawk or he'd join Houston Stackhouse and Peck Curtis for gigs. He was living in Broads Alley, Helena, but spend a lot of time with Sam in nearby Dundee. In June 1967, he spent 33 days in hospital but picked up enough to get back to his guitar. When George Mitchell met him he was too ill to

do much more than play a little bass behind Stackhouse and his condition deteriorated.

Death came on November 5th, 1967. A myocardial infection led to heart failure. "He loved Helena" said Sam, "that's the reason I buried him there." Robert lies in the Magnolia Cemetary. He would have been fifty eight on November 30th.

Gone is the brooding voice and chilly guitar, but the blues in Dundee live on. Every weekend the Nighthawks play in the locality led by Sam Carr and Frank Frost. Jack Johnson is still playing bass for them and Mary Alice Blues sings on occasion. They are probably the last amplified blues group in the area now, playing a brand that is heavily influenced by popular blues of the 50s.

Frank Otis Frost was born near Auvergne, a small town in Northern Arkansas, on April 15, 1936 but now lives in Lula, Mississippi - close to Dundee. He has known Sam since he was 17 years old, becoming an active band member in the late 'fifties and touring with the Nighthawks as far north as St. Louis.

At first he blew harmonica only, but when the guitarist quit he took over both instruments. With Sam's help, he picked up guitar quickly and got a rack for his harmonica - when Jack Johnson joined on bass-guitar the Nighthawks became a very solid combo, much used by Robert Nighthawk and Sonny Boy Williamson. In 1962 they auditioned for Sam Phillips and a session took place resulting in a single and LP release. Nothing much happened though European collectors were much impressed by both issues. In 1966 Frank tried again, this time in Nashville - NOT Memphis - where Scotty Moore recorded him for Jewel, producing some of the toughest downhome blues of the 'sixties. Oscar (or Arthur, according to Scotty) Williams was the man who blew some tremendous harp, in the best Little Walter tradition.



FRANK FROST, Phillips and Jewel bluesman who still plays with Robert Nighthawks' son and old group.

Again the records were not too successful, but proved that Frank was a bluesman of importance. This has led to his recent re-discovery by Steve la Vere and an interview by Jim O'Neal in "Living Blues". I'll leave it to Jim to provide a more detailed account of Frank's life and will end by saying how grateful I am to Sam Carr, for helping me in so many ways in an attempt to make his father's name live on, whilst carrying on with his task of making the real blues stay alive in the Delta.....
ml

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS :

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NEWS

WHERE TO FIND RECORDS IN CHICAGO? Cary Baker suggests the following: Gardners One-Stop, Barney's (home of Bright-Star and 4 Brothers), Joe's Record Shop, At-Tog, Don's Collectors Corner, The Blues Record Mart (sic) on Pulaski Road and The Old Wells Record Shop. The last-named, at 664 N. State has 78s such as B.B., Brownie McGhee, Lonnie Johnson etc. Owner Bill Chavers is reluctant to sell by mail but he stocks Oak books and holds rap sessions whenever enough people are around. Ray Flerlage took over the old K.O.Asher Distributors, and handles Ahura Mazda, Little Brother's F-M label, Everest, Tradition, Yazoo, Mamlish and such - Ray

has long been wellknown to blues buffs through his fine blues photography which has graced many covers/features. Flerlage is at 6821 S. Grandon...

ALBERT COLLINS back on tour after recording an LP for ABC produced by Bill Symczyk (who did the B.B. albums in recent times)...JIMMY WITHERSPOON on the road with Eric Burdon appearing at various Festivals...

SUNNYLAND RECORDS still appear dormant. Keith Tillman and Tony Martin still around however and Pythons are appearing regularly enough...JOHN LESTER has left Revival so the blues series on that label appears to be in trouble.