

THE PROWLING NIGHTHAWK

When 'Black Angel Blues' (Sweet Black Angel), once a Tampa Red number, made the Race charts in December 1949 for Aristocrat, the artist, Robert Nighthawk, had celebrated his thirteenth anniversary as a recording artist. Robert was never to go on to greater things, but the song was, for it impressed a young disc-jockey at WDIA in Memphis called B. B. King - The Beale Street Blues Boy - who, noticing that many stations banned the disc because of the significance of the words 'Black Angel', later re-recorded it as 'Sweet Little Angel', turning it into the sort of hit that Robert could only have dreamed of.

Babe, I know if you love me,
You won't treat me right;
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.

Robert Nighthawk was born just across the Mississippi River from Friars Point in Helena Arkansas. The date was November 30, 1909 and his real name was Robert Lee McCollum. A quiet, brooding sort of person, he grew up on a farm, but fled at the age of 14 to begin a life of rambling that was to last until his death.

In Louisiana, he met a man named Eddie Jones, an itinerant musician, who taught him to play the harmonica. Robert began to roam around the Delta, meeting others who were interested in music and looking for a better life. Soon after he became a man, reaching the age of 21, he ran into a guitarist called Houston Stackhouse in Hollandale and they became firm friends. This meeting led to guitar lessons, and from then on, Robert played guitar or harmonica as required or, reputedly, would play both at once using a neck-rack. At a time when Robert Johnson, Howling Wolf, Elmore James and others were just starting out, he became a semi-professional musician.

In the early 'thirties, Robert travelled extensively through the South, spending time in Southern Tennessee and getting as far North as Missouri. He came to know Will Shade, Sleepy John



Estes, Charley Patton and other veterans, before his peaceful existence in Dixie came to an end. Robert found himself 'in deep trouble' - he is said to have killed a man - and fled to St. Louis under the assumed name of McCoy (his mother's maiden name) in 1935. Here he fell in with other Delta friends, moving to Chicago in 1936 where he made his first records with Jack Newman on October 23.

Between 1937 and 1940 he commuted regularly between East St. Louis and Chicago, enjoying a fairly successful career as an artist and house musician for RCA-Bluebird. He variously recorded as Robert Lee McCoy, Lee McCoy, Ramblin' Bob and Peetie's Boy and continued to play both harmonica and guitar. Many of his early performances are of little interest when compared with what was to come later, but in June 1940, under the influence of Tampa Red, he cut his superb 'Friars Point Blues', using a slide for the first time on record. He must have been full of nostalgia, for, at a time when thousands were migrating North, he suddenly returned home.

Back in Arkansas he found that most people had forgotten him, but they did remember an early record he'd made called 'Prowling Nighthawk'. Once again he changed his name and this time to suit his new audiences. He became Robert Nighthawk, developing a new amplified sound based on his skill with a slide and guitar and making Helena his base of operations.

Somehow he avoided the war-time draft and from 1942 until

1948 resided at 308, Franklin Street, finding work with the Bright Star flour company and broadcasting daily from KFFA. Nearby West Helena, with its many bars, dance halls and gambling joints, needed musicians and Robert found that he could, at last, make a steady living as a professional doing his best to rival Sonny Boy Williamson, the biggest name in town.

His popularity grew quickly and his influence was vast - Elmore James, Muddy Waters and Earl Hooker all learned from him, being impressed by his almost faultless command of the guitar. With the Nighthawks, a band that once included men like Ike Turner, Pinetop Perkins, Ernest Lane and Kansas City Red, he took to the road again through the Delta, leaving KFFA for better jobs with WROX in Clarksdale, WDIA in Memphis and a long-forgotten station in Osceola, Arkansas. In 1948 he was living at Cairo, Illinois and, helped by Muddy Waters, came to Chicago once more to record for Aristocrat. He was to return in 1949 and 1950, before vanishing South again, to cut more sides for Len Chess, but never made any serious attempt to follow-up his 'Black Angel' triumph for the label.

In Clarksdale, he'd worked with vocalist Ethel Mae, who travelled with him to Cairo. Ethel passed as Robert's wife and was to record for Len Chess in his company. A superb blues singer, she was abandoned in 1950 by her 'husband' and vanished into obscurity.

Though Robert never stayed away from Helena too long

(Left) A 1942 promotion picture of Robert Nighthawk used by Bright Star Flour.
 (Below) A 1950 snapshot and publicity photo taken at the height of his career.



during the early 'fifties, he spent much time in towns like Paducah, Kentucky, Sikeston, Missouri, Osceola, Cairo, Illinois and East St. Louis, a good place for bluesmen, at the height of his career. From 1951 to 1953 he was under contract to the United/States labels, recording some beautiful songs, but by 1954 he had been abandoned by the independent R & B concerns and drifted into semi-obscurity.

For a decade he was based in the Friars Point, Dundee, Helena area, only taking to the road when money was scarce. Sam Carr, his son, was drumming for him and together they made a living from music, journeying as far as Florida and Mexico in search of gigs, using anyone they could find to help out at appearances in clubs. Things must have got very tough, however, by 1964, for suddenly Robert was back in Chicago again, trying to re-establish himself. In spite of sessions for Testament and Willie Dixon, concert appearances in Chicago and Canada and rediscovery by the white, collector community, he was to have a bitter, frustrating time, spending much of his stay on Maxwell Street playing for tips or in the smaller, West Side bars, barely earning enough to feed himself. He was also ill and the endless struggle to survive was not helping. Giving up, he went back to Dixie for the last time.

1965 and '66 saw Robert living in Broads Alley, Helena, but spending most of his time with his son in Dundee. Though ill, he'd do his best to make gigs with the remaining King Biscuit Boys or the ghost of his once powerful Nighthawks Band, now

led by Sam Carr and Frank Frost. In June 1967 he spent 33 days in hospital, but picked up enough to provide a bass backing for Houston Stackhouse, who recorded for George Mitchell, a noted folklorist. His condition then deteriorated rapidly and death came on November 5, 1967, when a myocardial infection led to heart failure. 'He loved Helena', said Sam, 'that's the reason I buried him there'.

Robert Nighthawk lies in the Magnolia Cemetery. Gone is the doom-laden voice and chilly guitar, but the blues in Dundee live on. Every weekend the Nighthawks play in the locality and are one of the few real blues bands left in the Delta. The memory of Nighthawk, one of the greatest of all recorded bluesmen, is still very much with them.

Highway 51,
 Lord, runs by my baby's door;
 Man, it's the longest ole highway,
 Whoo Lord, that I want to roam.

Baby, forgive me,
 Baby, for all the wrong I done;
 I don't want nothin' in my way,
 Whoo Lord, but that Highway 51.

Here comes that Greyhound Bus,
 Oh Lord, with its tongue stickin' out on the side;
 Yes, everybody better buy a ticket,
 Whoo Lord, if you want to ride.