

Prowling With The Nighthawk

Robert Nighthawk was one of the blues premier slide guitarists playing with a subtle elegance and a fluid, crystal clear style that was instantly recognizable. Nighthawk influenced a generation of artists including Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Earl Hooker and supposedly Elmore James. In many ways Nighthawk was the archetype of the classic bluesman spending his entire adult life rambling all over the South with frequent trips to the North playing a never ending string of one nighters punctuated by sporadic recording dates. Nighthawk's recording dates brought him only limited success but he remained popular in the South his entire life. It seems that every blues musician of consequence who emerged from the delta from the 30's through the 60's recalls running across Nighthawk. For all his visibility Nighthawk remains a shadowy figure; for one he never stayed in Chicago long enough to establish himself, he was interviewed only briefly and unlike many artists didn't appreciably benefit from the blues boom of the 1960's. Another reason stems from the man himself who associates referred to as restless, taciturn and stubborn. Recollections of Nighthawk give the impression of a serious, aloof man who confided little in others. Everyone, it seems, knew Robert Nighthawk yet nobody knew him. Above all it was his ceaseless wandering that likely stopped him from achieving greater fame: "Well, that's about all I been doin' all my life. I was down in Florida about three years and back up in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Arkansas, Kentucky, Indiana, Missouri and Iowa, New York and some other places."

Nighthawk was born Robert Lee McCollum in Helena, Arkansas, on Nov. 30 1909 to Ned and Mattie McCollum. He was raised in a farming community and was one of three children, which included a brother named Samuel and a sister named Ethel. Nighthawk came from a musical family as he relates in a 1964 interview: "Well all my people played music. Mother and dad and sister and brother and all. My brother played guitar. My brother helped me in all kind of ways. (My family) ...mostly played dances, parties, picnics and all that. When I left home I got right into it and I started blowing harmonica. I learnt that back in 24'. ...Boy named Johnny Jones, he's from Louisiana, ...say he learn me so I did."

Nighthawk credits Houston Stackhouse with teaching him guitar: "I started guitar in 1931.... Guy lived down in Crystal Springs, Mississippi, he, name a Houston Stackhouse, he learned me to play." Stackhouse emphasized: "I learned him how to play guitar, back in the 30's. I'd say, You ain't gon' eat nothin' till you get these notes right...He done got bad with it then when he come back from Chicago." Nighthawk roamed all over the South meeting the likes of Charlie Patton, Will Shade, Muddy Waters, Eugene Powell (Sonny Boy Nelson), Tommy Johnson and likely Son House and Robert Johnson.

Between 1932 and 1935 Nighthawk roamed further outside the Delta and during this period he played in the orchestra of the Dan Hildrege Show, ran with singer Laura Dukes and even fronted a jug band in Memphis. He also met and played with musicians such as Sleepy John Estes, Yank Rachell, Sonny Boy Williamson, Big Joe Williams, Sleepy John Estes, Hammie Nixon, Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and John Lee Hooker.

In 1935 Nighthawk left for St. Louis after getting into trouble and changed his name to Robert Lee McCoy (his mother's maiden name). Stackhouse recalls: "I heard he got in trouble in Louisiana once and had to take off and go up north or somewhere awhile. ...It was somethin' about a pistol, but they didn't say where he killed nobody. ...That's the reason he skipped cities, I think: to keep 'em from gettin' him and puttin' him in the pen." He related to Pete Welding that "he had to flee to avoid prosecution for a fatal shooting scrape in which he had been involved." Nighthawk had already achieved regional fame by the time he headed to St. Louis as Muddy Waters recalls: "Oh, he was popular all over Mississippi man. And he left and came north in the 30's. The next thing I heard he had a record out and on the market, you know."

Nighthawk first surfaced on record on October 23, 1936 for Vocalion playing guitar on a four-song session with Jack Newman. These songs were never issued and the circumstances surrounding this session are unknown.

St. Louis was a thriving blues town as Big Joe Williams observed: "Yeah, all of 'em piled right into

Chicago. But along in them days there wasn't no blues singers in Chicago. ...All the blues singers were around St. Louis and Memphis." Nighthawk stayed mainly in St. Louis between 1936-1939. Henry Townsend recalls this period: "It was a whole lotta fun. You didn't find a dead place in town. Sometimes we'd just get together as a group and just do jamming, you know. Sometimes the jam sessions would last four or five hours. Henry Brown would show up, Peetie Wheatstraw, Robert Johnson was there for a while, and of course Robert Nighthawk, Big Joe Williams, and my main man, Sonny Boy. St. Louis was a hot town for blues in those days, just like Chicago." Pianist Walter Davis, who had been recording since 1930, was responsible for getting Nighthawk signed to the Bluebird label. Henry Townsend provided the transportation: "I transferred them to Aurora, Illinois. There was about eight or nine of us ...we stacked them in the car like sardines."

The musicians entered the studios on May 5, 1937 for a marathon recording session. Nighthawk cut six sides with backing by Sonny Boy Williamson and Big Joe Williams. The May 5th sessions were also Sonny Boy Williamson's first and Nighthawk and Joe Williams backed him on this legendary session that produced such enduring classics as "Good Morning Little School Girl", "Blue Bird Blues" and "Sugar Mama". In addition Big Joe Williams recorded eight sides under his own name with Nighthawk and Sonny Boy backing him and Nighthawk also backed Walter Davis on an eight-song session.

Nighthawk had developed a distinctive single string style that is heard to good effect on these sides. He also plays some bottleneck most notably on the opening passages of "G-Man", "Don't Mistreat Your Woman" and " ". It was this latter song's popularity that was the basis for his changing his surname in the early 40's. Also notable are "Tough Luck" and "Pepper Mama" featuring fine ensemble playing with superb harmonica from Sonny Boy that foreshadowed the sound of the electrified combos of post-war Chicago.

It would be six months before Nighthawk returned to the Bluebird studios on November 11, 1937. He cut eight sides, seven of which are included here but the eighth, "Danger Blues", was unreleased at the time and the master has never been found. The sound is noticeably fuller with Walter Davis' piano heard on five songs. "Take It Easy, Baby" was the session's most enduring song and one he cut again in 1951 for the United label and was captured playing the song live on Maxwell Street in 1964.

More than a year would go by before he cut what was to be his final session on December 18, 1938 under the name "Ramblin' Bob." This session yielded eight more sides enlivened by the piano of Speckled Red and on "She's Got What It Takes" Nighthawk can be heard exhorting him to "play that thing Mr. Red." This final Bluebird session was more stylistically diverse and shows Nighthawk showing greater range as a vocalist particularly evident on "Every Day And Night", perhaps his finest vocal performance from this period. This song was a reworking of Tampa Red's 1935 "Don't Dog Your Woman" later covered by Sonny Boy Williamson as "Million Years Blues" in 1941 and by B.B. King as "When My Heart Beats Like a Hammer", reaching #8 on the R&B charts in 1954.

Between 1937 and 1940 Nighthawk commuted regularly between St. Louis and the Bluebird studio and was an in-demand session musician. He can be found on many sides playing either harmonica or guitar. In addition to his recordings with Sonny Boy and Big Joe he also accompanied the following artists: Baby Doo, Lee Brown, Walter Davis, Sleepy John Estes, Gene Gilmore, Willie Hatcher, Joe McCoy, Ann Sortier, Speckled Red, Henry Townsend, Walter Vincson and Peetie Wheatstraw. There is some speculation that Nighthawk may not be the harmonica player on all the sides attributed to him in blues discographies.

On June 5, 1940 he stepped into the studio again this time recording four sides for Decca as "Peetie's Boy." The name "Peetie's Boy" likely coming from his association with Peetie Wheatstraw. Big Joe Williams recalled: "Around St. Louis he played a right smart with Peetie...different jobs." Two songs from this session were with Nighthawk's girlfriend, Ann Sortier. Henry Townsend recalls them playing together: "Ann Sortier worked with him in Chicago for a long time. They were pretty famous on the South Side." These represent Nighthawk's last pre-war sessions and produced the beautiful "Friars Point Blues" featuring his finest slide work to date and only a few steps removed from the magnificent slide work he would be famous for in later

years.

When Nighthawk stepped into the Aristocrat studios on November 10, 1948 it had been eight years since he last recorded under his own name. In the intervening years his sound had undergone a transformation when he amplified his guitar in the early 1940's and mastered his brilliant slide technique. Nighthawk amplified his guitar around 1940 and moved back to Helena, Arkansas where his distinctive sound brought him regional fame.

Muddy Waters states that Nighthawk may have picked up the electric guitar in Chicago: "...He came to Chicago and he found out what was happening and he was good on fixin' instruments, you know, and I think just bought him a pickup and made his an electric, you know, a DeArmond pickup." Nighthawk was based in Chicago around 1940-41 fronting his own band playing blues and swing numbers. Big Joe says, "He didn't stay in no one place too long. He'd come here and leave- he played lots of clubs in Chicago, though, with Sonny Boy and different ones, but he'd be havin' a record shop or some kind of business, and the next thing, he done put up and gone...he'd go back to Big Foot Country, all in the Delta country. Nighthawk did in fact have a record business on the side selling new and used records from his brother's basement located on 3410 South Wabash Street. This was also where Nighthawk stayed when he was in Chicago.

Around 1941 he was back in Helena, Arkansas. Nighthawk's son, the drummer Sam Carr, commented on his father's return to Helena in 1941 complete with electric guitar: "People would come and stare at his guitar when he was playing it, they just couldn't figure it out." In Arkansas he found he was forgotten as a musician but that his 1937 song "Prowling Night-Hawk" was remembered so he changed his surname to Nighthawk.

A big influence on Nighthawk's slide technique was Tampa Red. Nighthawk may have stayed or rehearsed at Tampa's Chicago home, which was a stopover for many bluesman who passed through the city. In a 1964 interview Nighthawk describes the genesis of his style: "Well, I kind of started it then. Little bit, late hours of the night...I'd...one of them mean blues I'd play with the slide. ...I didn't exactly learn it from Tampa Red. Well, I used to like his playing with that slide, so I just got an idea that I wanted to play with it. ...I always wanted to play like Tampa Red. I imagine I come up with somethin' a little different." Houston Stackhouse confirms this story: "He said he knowed him (Tampa Red) but didn't say he hung around him much. He'd say "Well Stack, I'm gonna show you this old Tampa stuff, now," and he'd run it around. He'd be soundin' just like Tampa Red, too. And then he'd get back to his own style: "Well, I'm gon' get back in my own style now. I'm just showin' you I can do it."

In 1942 he got himself a spot on KFFA radio in Helena advertising for Bright Star Flour backed sometimes by guitarist Joe Willie Wilkins and Pinetop Perkins on piano, in competition with Sonny Boy's show for King Biscuit Flour. Pinetop began playing with Nighthawk sometime in the early 40's. As Pinetop recalls: "Robert and I were on the Bright Star Flour Hour program in Helena, Arkansas. We wasn't gettin' paid for playin' on the air, just did it for advertising where the band going to be and stuff. Well at least the man wasn't payin' *me*. He mighta been payin' Robert." Honeyboy Edwards remembers hearing Nighthawk advertising on the radio: "Robert started a little thing and called himself Nighthawk and that's when he would broadcast on the radio in Helena...Them country people would break down the house to get to the radio to hear Nighthawk broadcasting with his band." During this period Earl Hooker, Ike Turner, Ernest Lane and Kansas City Red all passed through Nighthawk's band. Nighthawk also broadcast from WROX out of Clarksdale and WDIA out of Memphis.

In 1948, with the help of Muddy Waters, Nighthawk began recording for Aristocrat later to become Chess. "I put him on the label" Waters stated. "Well I taken him to my company, you know and I helped him get on a record. Yeah, I taken him around to Chess, and then Chess heard him play, and he liked it." He recorded four sides at his first session: "Down the Line" and "Handsome Lover" with his girlfriend Ethel Mae on vocals and "My Sweet Lovin' Woman with Nighthawk taking the vocals. "Return Mail Blues" remained unissued from this session. Houston Stackhouse sheds some light on Ethel Mae: "Well, her name was Nanny Mae...he named her Ethel Mae. She was from Helena. She sung with him a pretty good while." Nighthawk also employed his then current wife Hazel as a vocalist and drummer during this period. Hazel recalls singing on some Chess numbers but these were never issued and no masters were ever found in

the Chess vaults.

His next session on July 12, 1949 was possibly his best. He waxed five sides that included "Black Angel Blues (Sweet Black Angel)" (based on Lucille Bogan's "Black Angel Blues" from 1930 and covered by Tampa Red in 1934 with the same title) and "Annie Lee Blues (Anna Lee)" based on Tampa Red's "Anna Lou Blues" from 1940. In response to Nighthawk's success with the song Tampa Red recut the song in 1950 as "Sweet Little Angel." B.B. King later covered "Sweet Black Angel" as "Sweet Little Angel" in 1956, a song he played in his DJ days on WDIA radio. The pairing became a double-sided hit. Nighthawk's style was fully formed showing him in total control, playing stunning crystal clear slide balanced with his deep mellow vocals. Critic Robert Palmer describes his notes as "dripping slowly out of the amplifier as thick oozing oil." Also cut at this session was "Sugar Papa" with Ethel Mae on vocals, "Return Mail Blues and "She Knows How To Love a Man" with Nighthawk on vocals.

Nighthawk came back to Chicago in 1950 to record his final session for Chess. Nighthawk's session on January 5, 1950 started with Ethel Mae taking the vocals on "Good News" and then the vocals himself on "Six Three O", "Prison Bound" and "Jackson Town Girl." Unable to capitalize on his initial success he would leave Chess for the fledgling Chicago label United and its subsidiary States.

In 1951 Nighthawk signed on with United Records. United was founded in 1951 by A&R man Lew Simpkins and his financial partner Leonard Allen. Nighthawk was the only true Delta bluesman on United's roster and they might have been looking at Chess's success with their roster of popular Delta bluesmen. Only two years previously did Nighthawk score big on Aristocrat with his doubled sided hit "Black Angel Blues/Annie Lee Blues" and the company obviously hoped for a repeat of this success. United recorded him on their very first day of sessions and two of United's first five releases were by "Robert Nighthawk & His Nighthawks Band."

United's Leonard Allen scoffed: "Robert Nighthawk? I didn't think nothin' of him. I didn't go into those joints where they were playing. Lew knew him- he had Robert Nighthawk in mind for the first session. So after he cut the session it did nothin'."

On his prior records for Chess Nighthawk stuck mostly to a slow, somber tempo but these sides find him backed by a swinging combo that propels him almost to the verge of rock and roll on the up tempo numbers. The piano of Roosevelt Sykes and Bob Call or Curtis Jones teamed with the rock solid drumming of Jump Jackson and Ransom Knowling's snapping bass lend plenty of excitement while Nighthawk plays some magnificent slide.

While these recordings are more stylistically diverse than his Chess sides they also contained fewer originals. Most of these songs had been in his repertoire for years. Nighthawk originally recorded "Take It Easy Baby" back in 1937 for Bluebird, "The Moon is Rising" was a staple of his King Biscuit shows and was a remake of Ivory Joe Hunter's 1945 hit "Blues At Sunrise" while "Nighthawk Boogie" was his theme song on the broadcasts. "You Missed A Good Man" was another song Nighthawk likely picked up from Tampa Red who recorded it in 1935. The basis of the song actually goes back much further copyrighted by Clarence Williams in 1915 as "You Missed A Good Woman When You Picked All Over Me." Trixie Smith first recorded the song in 1922 and Eva Taylor, the wife of Clarence Williams, covered it again in 1923. Tampa reworked the lyrics but the tune and chorus are identical. "Crying Won't Help You" was another Tampa song originally cut by him in 1946. Bumble Bee Slim originally recorded "Bricks In My Pillow" in 1935 and "Maggie Campbell" was a song Nighthawk likely picked up through Houston Stackhouse or Tommy Johnson who recorded the song in 1928 as "Maggie Campbell Blues."

After his United stint Nighthawk once again resumed his rambling ways staying mainly in the Helena/Friar's Point area usually working with his son Sam Carr and harmonica player Frank Frost, adding Jack Johnson on guitar in 1962, and performing as The Nighthawks. He was also living in St. Louis for a period and purportedly was in Mexico for a time. He would not record again until 1964. There was a flurry of activity in 1964 with sides cut for Chess, Testament, a documentary on Swedish radio and sides cut for Willie Dixon to interest UK promoters with touring lesser-known Chicago artists. He was also recorded live, with a small combo, on Maxwell Street in conjunction with the filming of a 1964 documentary called "And This is Free." In 1967

George Mitchell recorded Nighthawk's last sides playing in Houston Stackhouse's combo, mostly playing bass due to declining health. The music harks back to Nighthawk and Stackhouse's early delta days. Tommy Johnson's influence looms large with five of his songs being covered. In a way Nighthawk's life had come full circle; he was once again playing with Stackhouse who taught how to play guitar, Stackhouse in turn learned directly from Tommy Johnson and here were the two old friends performing the songs of Johnson together one final time. Nighthawk died less than two months after these recordings on Nov. 5 1967 of congestive heart failure at the Helena hospital. He was buried in Helena's Magnolia cemetery. "He loved Helena," said Sam Carr, "that's the reason I buried him there."

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Additional information taken from phone conversations with Robert Nighthawk's Daughter Geni Ward, his ex-wife Hazel McCollum, Ernest Lane and Sam & Dora Carr conducted by Jeff Harris. Additional help provided by Alan Balfour.