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## **ROBERT NIGHTHAWK**

"In the evening of Monday (August 3rd) I went with Don Kent and Bob Koester to "Diz's Club" to see the legendary Robert Nighthawk playing one of his first club dates in years. The club was quite a small place and the group, including John Lee Granderson, were just stuck in a corner. The atmosphere was quite electric and that night I felt closer to the blues than I've ever been. Robert's voice is very exciting and his "bottleneck" guitar playing was stunning. He did several numbers including his hit "The Moon Is Rising" and several Elmore James numbers such as "Anna .Lee" and "I Held My Baby Last Night". What a fabulous evening—I had to be dragged out of the place!" **Frank Scott (January 1965)**

### **A Note On Robert Nighthawk**

While listening to some tapes, Pete Welding made of Robert Nighthawk I resuscitated some notes, literally yellow now, in preparation for the liners. Reading them, I was struck with a curious nostalgia; Nighthawk, more than some, still retained a large amount of the romantic glamour that attaches itself to names that come alive off old record labels. At least, for me.

The nickname "Nighthawk", of course, came from one of his Bluebird "hits", back in the 'thirties, though he didn't use it until many years afterwards. People, he said, remembered the song, not him. Born in Helena Arkansas on November 30th, 1909, Nighthawk was taught guitar by a neighbor, Houston Stackhouse. He traveled extensively in the late 'twenties, meeting most of the blues singers of the Memphis-Mississippi area such as Sleepy John Estes, Will Shade, even Charlie Patton "and his knife". Johnny Young still remembers seeing Nighthawk in Vicksburg in the early 'thirties, playing guitar and harmonica. His real name is not McCoy, the one he recorded under for Bluebird and Decca, but McCullum; as used on the Aristocrat sessions. (McCoy is his mother's maiden name). When asked why he changed his name, he said he had to when he left the South as he was in deep trouble.

His sessions produced no masterpieces, perhaps excepting the exceedingly fine "Friars Point", but they were usually good and sold fairly well. He was used extensively as a sideman for Decca and Bluebird artists, playing guitar or harmonica. I've heard it said that Nighthawk was one of the first to switch to electric guitar in the early 'forties, and adopted it to a

bottleneck technique that is reputed to be one of the most influential, and very likely one of the smoothest. He taught Earl Hooker to play, supposedly taught a lot to Elmore James and imparted somewhat to Muddy Waters, who, in return for the favor, got Nighthawk his Aristocrat sessions. In the next few years he also recorded for Chess, States and United and can be credited with at least two post-war classics: "The Moon Is Rising", may be the best single side in the States catalogue, and the somber "Black Angel" recorded for Aristocrat. Others such as "Crying Won't Help You", "Jackson Town Girl" and "Return Man Blues" are worthy of mention.

Pete Welding informed me, in May 1964, that Nighthawk had been discovered and would play at the University of Chicago Folk Festival. Before the performance I was introduced to a melancholy man of medium height in a dark suit. Nighthawk looked rough, as if he had attended the same schools as Big Joe Williams; but whereas Joe is normally very outgoing, jovial and garrulous, Nighthawk was polite but taciturn, pensive with the air that the world had been a hard place to live in and always would be. He didn't crack a smile that night, as I recall. Indeed, although he would grin, and occasionally "grandstand" on Maxwell Street or in a Club, he was usually serious; sometimes almost bitter.

Of course, I had heard 'bottleneck' guitar before. Muddy often, Big Joe (alas, not so often), Jimmy Brewer, Arvella Gray; many of the singers working in Chicago. But not often have I felt an effect so intensely as when the first pulsating notes, ripped from the guitar by the slide, charged the Hall, sobbing behind the gloomy voice that was as heavy as a dead hand. It appeared as if Nighthawk had cowed the musicians working with him, as well as the audience; lonely, brooding figure, not quite at ease on the stage, pulling together moments of private sadness and hidden violence.

That summer, Nighthawk worked at "Dizzy's Place", a tavern on 47th and Went worth, with John Lee Granderson on bass (later replaced by Johnny Young), a mediocre drummer called Jimmy Smith, and occasionally Big Walter or John Wrencher on harmonica. I hardly missed an evening he was working. Despite the obvious limitations of his flat, droning voice and an unfortunate predilection for imitating Cecil Gant, Nighthawk rarely was tedious; he was excellent for creating a mood of introspection. It's no idle boast that I spent one of the happiest nights there that I have ever had in a blues joint.

Later on that year, I was helpful in sending Nighthawk, Johnny Young and his drummer to Canada for a gig, not without many hand-ups. A few days before they left, Nighthawk and I sat in Koester's basement at the Jazz

Record Mart, drinking and talking over the trip to come. Perhaps we were high, but there was an unusual rapport between us as we swapped jokes and he told me many anecdotes and stories about his career. As he parted, he said in a wry voice, "yeah, we'll both become millionaires", and laughed—the only time I recall this strange, serious man doing so—with much feeling, as if he had made a happy discovery.

I don't think Nighthawk was ever happy in the City. There was, and still is, a terrible amount of scuffling for a bluesman who isn't represented on a major label. The only work he could get was one-nighters in small bars, hustling on Maxwell Street and a job as a sideman on one Chess session. He told me he frankly preferred the South. It was cheaper, apt to be less violent than the City, and he was better known. He left Chicago after making some sides for Pete Welding. Jimmy Smith, the drummer, went with him but returned soon. They were working outside of Jackson, he said, and Mississippi State Troopers, noticing the Illinois license plates on Smith's car, ran them out of town because they suspected Nighthawk of being a civil rights worker! Smith returned to his job as a house painter, leaving Nighthawk headed for Florida and unfortunate oblivion.

**Don Kent (March 1967)**