

# Mojo Hand: The Life and Music of Lightnin' Hopkins

By Timothy J. O'Brien and David Ensminger

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To listen to the country blues of Lightnin' Hopkins is to become intimately—achingly—aware of the past. There is an unmistakable and unmodern urgency to his voice and guitar playing; here is a man who has stories to tell, stories rooted strongly in a concept of person and place and time. This music is mostly what we have to remember Hopkins by.

Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins was born in 1912 in Leon County, Texas, into a musical family. At an early age he met and was influenced by fellow Texas bluesman, Blind Lemon Jefferson. Hopkins spent years working as a farm laborer before moving to Houston to devote his full efforts to music. As depicted in *Mojo Hand: The Life and Music of Lightnin' Hopkins*, Hopkins was a hard man to pin down, his life often hidden and opaque. Distrustful of authority, Hopkins preferred to work for cash up front. Pay him, and he would sit down and play a gig or make a record. Then he would move on.

*Mojo Hand* began as the master's thesis ("Sam Lightnin' Hopkins: Houston Bluesman, 1912-1960") and eventual doctoral dissertation of the late Timothy J. O'Brien. When O'Brien—obviously passionate about his subject—became gravely ill with cancer, his friend David Ensminger helped him complete the book and get it published. The professed goal of the authors is to show Hopkins as an important African-American voice in mid-twentieth century Texas, and to demonstrate Hopkins's influence on later generations of musicians. However, the academic ancestry of the book—and, perhaps, its dual authorship—leads to a flatness of tone and a distance from its subject. Therefore, the goal of the authors is not quite fulfilled.

The authors do stress Hopkins's importance and influence:

Although Hopkins was a blues singer by trade, in reality, he acted as a cultural ambassador and an educator whose music taught generations of listeners what being born black in East Texas near the turn of the twentieth century meant... Whether in youth clubs such as the Catacombs or psychedelic hippie joints like the Love Street Light Circus, Hopkins preached the African American experience, in the form of his blues songs, which transcended momentary "highs." For many teenagers, the drugs, alcohol, and need to satisfy hormonal desires may have been more important than the musical entertainment, but the history that Hopkins's songs and stage patter embodied was fertile and long-lasting.

The authors' list of musicians influenced by Hopkins is impressive, beginning with Jimi Hendrix and continuing through Stevie Ray Vaughan, Albert Collins, Billy Gibbons, and many others.

*Mojo Hand* is a book heavy with facts—at times too heavy. For much of the book, the life of Hopkins is reduced to a listing of gig after gig and recording session after recording session. The proliferation of dates and places becomes numbing. For example, readers are often presented with street addresses for nightclubs that closed 50 years ago, and, at one point, we learn that Hopkins took Flight 959 from Houston to Los Angeles while on his way to Tokyo for a series of gigs in Japan.

The excessive details are no doubt a reflection of the meticulous research done by the authors, who have a deep regard and respect for their subject, but as they are presented in *Mojo Hand*, many of these facts lead nowhere. Other writers might make something of all this minutiae, perhaps producing a then-and-now narrative that situates Hopkins at a certain place in American cultural history. However, O'Brien and Ensminger are not—perhaps for reasons beyond their control—those writers. Thus a full picture of Hopkins as a musician is lost in a deluge of arcane trivia, and Hopkins as a person seems to be lost, too.

The book itself is an attractive object, well designed with an appealing cover. However, the design has flaws: there are a paltry 10 photographs included with the text, and only six of them feature Hopkins (or seven, if a photo of Hopkins's tombstone is counted). The book's index is rudimentary, with no listings for Hopkins himself or for his relations with other people—not even his wife. Perhaps the book's most jarring deficiency is the absence of a critical discography; with an artist whose output was as prodigious as Hopkins's—the authors say that 1,343 Hopkins tracks are available for download at Amazon.com—the casual reader, listener, or non-expert requires some guidance about where to start. Again, an opportunity to put the life and career of Lightnin' Hopkins into a larger context is lost.

Still, the authors emphasize Hopkins's lasting legacy:

Deep down in the blood-thickened grooves of his songs, listeners can catch glimpses, shards, and shadings of sorrow songs found on slave and sharecropper plantations, prison work fields, and infamous prison chain gang highways.... Hopkins's sorrow songs constitute a living fabric, a commanding version of history as his-story.

Despite its flaws, *Mojo Hand* is a useful and interesting book. Lightnin' Hopkins's rich though opaque life deserves to be documented and remembered. And beyond the book there is still his music—the guitar, the voice—speaking to us from the past.

*Lowell Mick White*