

Tale Feathers

By Michael "Hawkeye" Herman



Son House



Bukka White
(Booker T. Washington White)



Sam "Lightin'" Hopkins



Son House & Mance Lipscomb



Sam Chatmon



Aaron T-Bone Walker

The purpose of these memoirs is to shed a bit of light on the human side of many deceased blues artists who have become legendary figures, and as a result, distant icons to younger/newer enthusiasts. The new generation is left with photographs, records, and academic biographies, but little knowledge of what these "old guys/gals" were like as people. I aim to describe how they appeared and sounded, offstage and on, to make these heroes more understandable as people who expressed their human experience through their music.

I.

We were standing in line to purchase tickets for a concert that was going to begin in ten minutes and looked like it was going to sell out. The year was 1968, Thanksgiving weekend in Berkeley, CA. The large Zellerbach Concert Hall on the UC Berkeley campus, capacity 2,200, was not the most intimate place to hear acoustic country blues, but this promised to be a special night. My ladyfriend and I were starting to get anxious about getting in to the show. Lots of advance ticket holders were showing up and being ushered to their seats. The line we were in was moving much too slow. "If I'd only bought tickets in advance, I wouldn't be waiting like this. If I'd only had the money in advance, we would already be inside." Finally, we got to the ticket window. The woman selling tickets said what I didn't want to hear, "Sorry, we're sold out!" Pause. My heart sank. "But if you don't mind sitting on the side of the stage, you can purchase tickets. "Two, please!" was my immediate response. An usher took a group of about ten or twelve of us latecomers and led us up on the stage about fifteen feet from the solitary chair and two microphones that marked center

stage. We folded our coats to sit on, and settled in for a night of music with Bukka White, Mance Lipscomb, Son House, and Lightin' Hopkins. I will try to describe the evening's events. Many moments are crystal clear, many have slipped my memory. I am open to correction from others who may have been present at the concert.

Booker T. Washington "Bukka" White took the stage wearing a natty iridescent grey business suit, shiny black shoes, dark shirt, a large circular charm around his neck, and a dark grey woven straw hat. He appeared to be no more than 5'7", was squat, bulldogish in stature, soft jowls in his cheeks, had definitely been hit on the button in his brief days as a boxer, and had thick fleshy hands. He seemed in good health, robust in his approximately 65 years, slightly tipsy, but ready to play. The music that came out of him and his metal-bodied National guitar was driving and hypnotic. He sat with his legs spread wide, tapping his toes with the beat, keeping a steady alternating bass with his thumb, while his fingers and the slide on his little finger played unique musical figures against the rhythm. He obviously enjoyed performing, smiled and clowned a bit with the audience, and every now and then would throw in some guitar "trick," like strumming in a wide figure-eight up and down the neck, tapping his fingers on the face of the instrument, playing over the top of the neck with the slide, or playing with the guitar behind his head. His voice was clear, high, and slightly nasal sounding. He was not a growler, but could really moan when he wanted to. That night he played Bukka's Jitterbug Swing, Sleepy Man Blues, Poor Boy A Long Way From Home, Shake'em On Down, and Sic 'em Dogs Blues, among others. The audience loved it!

Mance Lipscomb stood about 5'8", was of slender wiry build, 75 years old, and dressed simply in grey cotton work pants, white shirt with sleeves rolled up, and dark crushed fedora. His face was angular with deep lines and hollow cheeks. His hands were not particularly large or graceful, and like the rest of him, showed the wear of years of hard work. He played a Harmony Sovereign guitar. He sat erect and played in a single bass note style (monotonic) with his thumb, while performing a wide variety of syncopated licks and runs with his index, and infrequently, second finger. He was truly a songster, and played blues as well as other styles. He seemed to enjoy playing for the people. He didn't go in for windy introductions, but did show some humor. He cranked out one song after another in the same manner that he must have approached life/work as a sharecropper in Texas - plowing one long clean row at a time, from sun to sun, with an attitude toward hard work as "a job to be done," with the briefest of breaks at the end for a sip of water, and on to the next row/song. His voice did not have a lot of range, but was warm, resonant, and easy to listen to. Some of the songs he played that night were: Sugar Babe It's All Over Now, Black Gal, 'Bout a Spoonful, Rock Me All Night Long, and Jack O' Diamonds Is A Hard Card To Play. Mance certainly looked his age, but when he got behind his guitar, look out! He had lots of songs, and lots of stamina. He was just getting warmed up when his set was over. He was an amazing artist whose warmth, honesty, and variety of tunes kept everyone listening and tapping their feet.

Eddie "Son" House walked slowly to center stage. The National guitar was already leaning against the chair. A bit above average height, dark and thin, he had long arms, but not particularly large hands with fleshy fingers. He sported a thin mustache, close cropped hair balding on top, with grey along the sides. He had a high, deeply lined forehead that gave him the appearance of squinting. He wore dark trousers, black dress shoes, a white shirt, and black string tie. He moved very slowly, but gracefully on his 68 year old frame. When he got to the spotlight chair he did not sit down. He stood there and began to clap out a beat with his hands. As the audience fell stone silent, he began to sing the words to the gospel song, John the Revelator, followed by the work/party song, Grinning In Your Face. Whoa, this old guy stopped everything cold with the first two tunes. I mean, the way he slowly made it on stage, then leaned into these two songs with an intensity that betrayed his fragile appearance, riveting everyone in the hall. Thunderous applause for both of these a capella songs. He grinned and nodded, turned and picked up the guitar, sat down, reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a metal slide, which he slipped on the third finger of his left hand. His voice was rough, weak at times, but he sang, hooted, and growled his way through his songs with an animated intensity that must have been really something when he was at his full power to shout, stomp, and possibly breathe fire, thirty years previous. His guitar playing in open tunings, was sparse but tasty, with driving rhythmic slashes, mostly at the twelfth fret with the slide. His voice and guitar played back and forth to each other, weaving in and out. He did not play steady time in the bass strings, but created a forceful, simply repeated fabric, a riff oriented sound that grew stronger as he bore down into each song. He did not say much. His set seemed short, but it was worth it to see him at all. I think he did Pearlman,

Preachin' Blues, Death Letter Blues, John the Revelator, and Grinning In Your Face. He smiled warmly at the audience, waved, and slowly walked off the stage to wild applause.

Sam "Lightin'" Hopkins was the headline and closing act. He came on stage carrying his Gibson guitar, wearing a gold brocade type dinner jacket, dress shirt, dark shoes, dark slacks, dark tie, and dark glasses. He was of average height, 5'9" or so, medium build, well kept hands, with a nice smile and gold-capped teeth. He did not wear a hat this evening, and his hair was "konked" close. He looked a bit younger than his age of 57. His voice was deep, resonant, and expressive. His guitar playing leaned heavily on fast paced boogie bottom and slow triplet blues. He played quick-fingered runs on the up-tempo songs, and notes that oozed out of his guitar on the slow ones. His poetry and guitar playing were masterfully crafted and linked. He was feeling happy and had obviously been drinking. Then he started to get a bit sloppy. The audience grew uneasy. He tried to cajole the people back with light banter in between songs. It wasn't working. He made reference to what a good job President Nixon was doing, and got a round of cat-calls from the always political Berkeley audience. Retreating, he responded, "Well, whatever you say..." He introduced the song, Louise Blues, as "one of his favorites," and played the song with deep, heart felt emotion. He got a nice round of applause. He lit a cigarette, took a long drag, and then said, "Here's one of my favorite songs," and proceeded to play the same song, all the way through, again! Either he was too lit to realize it, or, more likely, he was getting even. He played on, a bit less light-hearted and more intense. He sang a number of his classic songs and the audience was back on his side. Besides the two Louise Blues, I think he did Mister Charlie, Mojo Hand, Tom Moore's Blues, Rock Me Baby, and You've Got to Watch Yourself. The audience gave him a great round of applause, and all the artists a standing ovation. The show, a little more than two hours in length, was over.

The satisfied audience was filing out, talking about the great blues show they had just witnessed. It occurred to me that since we were already on the stage, and since there was no heavy security, why not slip back-stage and see what was going on? So, we did. A few people were milling about while Bukka White sat in a folding chair, the guitar in his lap, an open bottle on the long table in front of him. He was getting very drunk, talking to nobody in particular, and was singing and playing for his own self. My friend and I sat on the table opposite him as everyone else drifted away. He played, on and on. For one reason or another, Lightin' didn't like Bukka, and was not afraid to show it. Lightin' was being Lightin', and had taken over the only real dressing room. It seems that he held respect for Son's age and reputation, and was old time Texas pals with Mance, so he "allowed" them to share the "green room" and a bottle. Bukka, locked out of the party, took his frustration out in the most immediate way he knew. He sat down in the outer area, drank from his own pint bottle, and played out his blues. We watched and listened intently, consoling and encouraging him. Everyone else had left, and Bukka was still playing and drinking hard. This was no time to be asking questions about how to play this or that on the guitar. I noticed his easy, fluid approach as he worked his way around the neck with the slide and his fingers. Such a delicate touch from such meaty hands. I was trying to enjoy, and absorb, as much as I could. I had been listening and trying to play blues guitar for a number of years, so I was ready for this. We sat there for a long time listening to Bukka. Finally, when we could barely understand his now heavily slurred speech, we quietly bid him good night, and slipped away. As we left him alone, he launched into another song.

I stayed up into the wee hours of morning running my fingers and slide softly over the neck of my guitar searching for the sounds I had heard from Bukka, Mance, Son, and Lightin' that evening. I still do.

II.

It was a sunny and clear afternoon in the spring of 1970. I was sitting with my guitar in my lap in Sproul Plaza of the University of California at Berkeley campus. I often came here to play music for the lunchtime college crowd. This was one of my favorite spots to perform on the street in the San Francisco Bay area. The atmosphere there has always been bazaar/bizarre, and street artists of all kinds have found appreciative audiences in, and around, the campus area.

I had a special reason for being on the Berkeley campus on this day. Yes, I had brought my guitar along, but not to perform. The Berkeley Blues Festival was taking place and many well- and lesser-known blues artists would be performing and doing workshops here. Maybe I'd get a chance to pick up a few pointers.

T-Bone Walker had done a noon performance, backed by the Luther Allison Band. The brief show was super. T-Bone was mesmerizing. His larger than life stage presence betrayed his diminutive 5'5", or so, frame. He was dressed to the nines in an iridescent green suit with thin yellow stripes running through it and fancy dress shoes dyed green to match. He played the jumbo f-hole Gibson guitar with that classic "T-Bone sound" that so many have tried to duplicate. I noticed that when taking a solo he held the guitar flat out in front of him, the back parallel to the ground. It was great to see and hear this legendary master of modern blues. The music filled the open plaza area, and the crowd loved it. After his set, I found myself accompanying T-Bone while he took a tour of the campus, along with members of his large entourage, for the next hour or so. Then, needing a quiet place to sit down with my guitar, think about the music I had heard, and do some woodshedding, I picked a sunny spot where I could have a bit of privacy. I sat with my eyes closed, soaking up the sun, unconsciously running my fingers over the strings of my acoustic guitar, singing to myself. I was gone to the world for some time.

When I opened my eyes I beheld an elderly black man looking down at me smiling a broad, knowing smile. He was about 5'7", light skinned, wiry in stature, and had a very long white beard. He was wearing highly polished brown shoes, khaki work pants, a flannel shirt, and a wool cap with a brim. There was a twinkle in his eye that gave him a very youthful expression, but I would have guessed that he was in his seventies. I had been a country blues fanatic for some time, and I recognized him immediately. It was Sam Chatmon, a member of the famous Mississippi Sheiks of the early 30's, former accompanist for Texas Alexander, and the brother of the legendary Bo Carter. He was here to do a performance at the Blues Festival.

"Uh, hello Mr. Chapman," I managed in my state of surprise. "Call me Sam," he responded immediately. "Gettin' some blues down, huh. Soundin' pretty good" he said, still smiling. I nodded sheepishly. "Well, you played for me, how about I play for you?" I offered him my guitar, but he said he had a guitar inside the student union building, and would I care to follow him to where he'd left it. I was on my feet in an instant, and followed him into the nearby building.

We walked into the student lounge. Students sat on couches and lounge chairs studying and chatting quietly. I followed Sam over to a corner of the room where he pulled out a guitar case from behind a couch. He opened the case and took out a small bodied Gibson acoustic guitar with a dark finish, round sound-hole, and raised pick-guard. I think it was some type of old "L" model Gibson. We sat down on the couch and Sam quickly checked the tuning of the instrument.

We were both oblivious to the college scene that surrounded us. "Here's one that was real popular a long while back," he said as he hit a first position C chord. He then launched into a version of the song, In the Jailhouse Now . I watched and listened with intensity. He played this song much in the style that was popularized by the Blue Yodeler, Jimmie Rodgers, who had a huge hit with the song more than 40 years previous. It was played in a medium country two-beat style; alternating bass notes with chords, and using single note runs between the chord changes. His playing and vocal style were both very smooth and strong, especially at his age. He obviously liked the tune, and chuckled to himself at the humorous aspects of the lyrics. When he finished the song I told him how much I enjoyed it, and asked if the song wasn't more country than blues. "Well, ain't much difference 'tween country and blues to me. I played for all kinds of folks in my time, and I played all kinds of music, but it all comes out blues to me. Wanna hear another one?" He needn't have asked, but I enthusiastically told him I'd listen as long as he wanted to play.

"I always liked those nasty ones," he said with a grin. He launched into a shuffle rhythm in E, and proceeded to sing about ten hilarious verses to the song Stoop Down, Baby. We were both laughing and enjoying the song so much that we hadn't noticed that a crowd was developing around the couch we were sitting on. When Sam finished, there was applause from those gathered around. We both became aware that we were not alone. "Well, I guess I could do at least one more, " he said with a wink. He then sang one of his original songs, What's the Name of That Thing, and followed it with another original tune, Don't Sell It, Give It Away.

At this point, one of the Berkeley Blues Festival officials showed up and told Sam he had been looking for him, and that they had to be somewhere to finalize the program for the evening concert. Sam looked at the

guy with a time worn expression of patience and said, "Just hold your horses a minute, I'm playin' for my friend here." Without waiting for an answer, Sam began to sing another one of his original songs, Brown Skin Women Blues. Slow and moody, the song rolled out of him and his guitar like a river of emotional remembrances.

When he finished the song, he looked at me and said he was sorry, but he had to go take care of some business with the aforementioned festival official. He put his guitar back in its case. I thanked him profusely for taking the time to play for me. He smiled that smile. "Well, like I said, you played for me, least I could do. Keep it up, son." We shook hands, and he went off with the guy who had come looking for him. I was on cloud nine, and rising. What a day this had been for an aspiring blues musician.

Over the years, I have been lucky enough to meet and learn from many wonderful blues players, but none was kinder or more encouraging than the great Sam Chatmon.

Bukka White (Booker T. Washington White) was born November 12, 1909 in Memphis, TN. Bukka White was a traditional Delta blues singer and slide guitarist whose coarse-cut vocals and jagged guitar riffs were often a study in blues primitivism. Despite the purity and rich expressiveness of his style, White never quite received the acclaim due him at the time he made the bulk of his recordings—from 1930 to 1940. But after his rediscovery in the early '60s, White's blues repertoire and Delta style were much better appreciated. Today, many blues historians consider his music nearly on a par with such early Delta blues greats as Charley Patton, Tommy Johnson, and Robert Johnson. He was a cousin of blues legend B.B. King, and White's slide guitar playing greatly influenced B.B.'s use of an extensive and unique vibrato on the electric guitar. Bukka White died February 26, 1977 in Memphis, TN. He was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1990.

Mance Lipscomb was born April 9, 1895 in Navasota, Texas. A Texas sharecropper and self-described songster whose vast repertoire included everything from straight blues and spirituals to simple folk tunes and children's songs, Mance didn't begin recording until he was sixty-five years old. Lipscomb spent almost all of his working life in Brazos County, Texas, farming a twenty-acre plot of bottomland and on weekends performing at country dances, picnics, and house parties. Lipscomb's father, an emancipated slave and fiddler, taught him the rudiments of fiddling; later Lipscomb taught himself how to play guitar and eventually developed a supple, richly textured finger-picking style that complemented his hushed, easy-flowing vocals. Rather than just play the blues, Lipscomb performed most types of roots music, since a songster's survival often depended on his performing versatility. His vast storehouse of songs and stories and his intricate finger-picking technique influenced many of the fledgling white folk artists caught up in the folk-blues boom of the early '60s. Mance Lipscomb died January 30, 1976 in Navasota, TX.

Son House (Eddie James House, Jr.) was born March 21, 1902 (1886?) in Riverton, MS. House was one of the originators of the Mississippi Delta blues style and he can safely be called one of the most important bluesmen ever, based on his extensive influence on other definitive bluesmen such as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters and his long-lasting performing career that spanned half a century. His heavy, raw slide guitar playing and intense vocals mark him as one of the most powerful blues performers to be heard. He was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1980. Son House died on October 19, 1988 in Detroit, MI.

Lightnin' Hopkins (Sam Hopkins) was born March 15, 1912 in Centerville, Texas. Lightnin' Hopkins was a Texas blues great whose career spanned six decades and who, in all probability, made more recordings than any other blues artist. His was a prolific songwriter and a convincing performer. When recording or performing, Hopkins often improvised with sincerity and humor. He made up verses as he went along, or else altered lyrics as he saw fit. Hopkins was a tremendously important blues figure and one of the most influential country blues artists of the post-World War II period. In Texas, only Blind Lemon Jefferson, T-

Bone Walker, and Stevie Ray Vaughan have had as much impact on the state's blues legacy. He was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1980. Lightnin' Hopkins died January 30, 1982.

T-Bone Walker (Aaron Thibeaux Walker) was born May 28, 1910 in Linden, Texas.

"You've got to feel the blues to make them right. That kind of music really affects people, too. It's played from the heart and if the person listening, understands and is in the right mood, why, man, I've seen them bust out and cry like a baby". - T-Bone Walker

Aaron T-Bone Walker was a creator of modern blues and a pioneer in the development of the electric guitar sound that shaped virtually all of popular music in the post-World War II period. Walker was the quintessential blues guitarist. He influenced virtually every major post-World War II guitarist, including B.B. King, Jimi Hendrix, Freddie King, Albert King, Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, Eric Clapton, and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

"He was the first electric guitar player I heard on record, he made me so that I just had to go out and get an electric guitar...That was the best sound I ever heard." - B.B. King

From Walker, in fact, came the electric blues guitar style. He was the first blues artist to play the instrument, and the one who accomplished the most in exploring its wide range of possibilities.

Walker was also a first-class singer and entertainer, and his full-bodied voice complemented his guitar playing. With the possible exceptions of Blind Lemon Jefferson, from whom Walker learned the basics of blues guitar, and Lightnin' Hopkins, Walker might well be the greatest blues artist to ever come out of Texas. His signature song, "Call It Stormy Monday" (But Tuesday Is Just as Bad), is generally considered to be one of the greatest blues songs of all time. T-Bone Walker died March 16, 1975. He was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1980 and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1987.

Sam Chatmon was born on January 10, 1897, in Bolton Mississippi. He was one of eleven children. His father had been a slave and was a popular fiddler in the Hinds County area of Mississippi. His mother played guitar. From an early age, Sam played in the family string band for square dances, barbecue busts, fish fries, picnics, and white dances, in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Illinois. Sam played guitar, banjo, mandolin, bass, and harmonica. In 1930, he recorded as an accompanist for Texas Alexander. In the early 30's he played and recorded with the Mississippi Sheiks. He worked outside music from the early 1940's to the early 1960's. He returned to the music scene in the early 1960's, and was in demand as a performer at blues/folk festivals, in clubs, and in concert until his death in 1983.

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