

Sam 'Lightnin' Hopkins: A lesson in blues guitar, life, and eight ball pool

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Amongst the many older blues musicians I saw perform and learn from in the late 1960s and early 1970s was Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins. I was fortunate enough to have seen "Lightnin'" perform quite a few times. On one of these occasions I received a memorable backstage tutoring from him at a bar called The Keystone in Berkeley, CA, in 1970.

My wife and I got to the club well before the show was to start. We got seats at a table right down front. The opening act came on and played for about 45 minutes. We anxiously awaited Lightnin' getting on stage. Lightnin' was in the 'dressing room' at the rear of the club, just off the poolroom, but he was not 'ready' to come on stage for his own Lightnin' reasons.

About 45 more minutes went by, and no Lightnin.' I was getting restless and impatient, so I told my wife I need to stretch my legs, and asked her to hold the table for us while I went to the pool room at the back of the club for a bit of 'exercise'.'

There was nobody else around in the poolroom, as everyone was waiting out front for Lightnin' to get on stage and perform. I grabbed a pool cue and put my coins into the slot to release the balls. The minute the pool balls hit the trough, to my amazement, Lightnin' slipped out of the back room, cigarette in hand, leaned against the dressing room door, and silently watched me duff around on the table for a few minutes. I was getting a bit nervous, having him watch me so intently.

After about ten minutes of his watching me hack around the pool table, Lightnin' asked me if I wanted to shoot some eight ball **pool** ... for a 25 cents a ball. I agreed. Well, he kicked my ass for about \$5 in very short order. After his roundly defeating me, I told him that I was eager to hear him play, and so were many others. I thanked him for the pool game, and I put up my cue. (I couldn't afford to lose any more money!) Lightnin' nodded and said he might as well get his guitar and get up on stage. Great idea!

I went back to the table I had left my wife to 'hold down' in the front of the club near the stage. I sat down with my wife and told her I had just lost about \$5 to Lightnin'. She shook her head and smiled, and she coyly said something about " ... while the rest of the folks in the place have been waiting over an hour for him to perform?!"

Lightnin' got on stage and played an excellent set, a little over an hour long. Most enjoyable. After he got off stage my wife and I went back to the poolroom/dressing room area where Lightnin' was holding court with a few fans. I hung out and just listened to the blues 'jive' going down. Eventually the room cleared out and it was just Lightnin,' my wife and me. I introduced my wife to him (a dangerous move on my part with a hustler like Lightnin'). Lightnin' smiled, was very cordial, and as if to 'rub my nose in it,' said he'd play the guitar for us and show me a few things on the guitar ... "Since I already took your money!"

I sat mesmerized right next to him as he played a signature fast instrumental boogie/shuffle on the guitar, then a slow blues, "Mr. Tom Moore Blues." Then another fast shuffle, "Black Cadillac." Lightnin' encouraged me watch closely as he did a version of "Rock Me, Baby." He played for my wife and I for about an hour. Then it was over. He put up his guitar, we thanked him profusely, and said, "G-'night."

I had learned a lot by watching him on stage at previous performances, but this 'personal lesson' really gave me a good feel and sense of recognition of the Lightnin' licks/riffs that he used on many of his tunes. His 'vocabulary' of licks on the guitar was somewhat limited, but he knew how to play the same lick/riff forward, backward, from the middle to the front, from the middle to the back, from the back to the front, etc., each effort creating a different blues sound.

As an example, Lightnin' would take a simple blues guitar turnaround lick/riff in E, (that I was already overusing in my guitar playing at that time) ... a simple D7 shape on the guitar moved up to the third & fourth fret, now the D7 was an E7) ... and Lightnin' walked it down the neck to the first position E chord playing all three of treble/high strings at once. Then he played the lick/riff backwards, then he picked individual notes within the turnaround as he descended or ascended the neck. He would frequently add individual notes of the first position blues scale in E to the variety of 'turnaround' licks/riffs he played. He changed it a bit every time he played the lick/riff.

What I saw was how a person can take one simple guitar lick/riff, and know it so well that one can extend it and keep creating different sounds within the shapes of that lick/riff. Also, sometimes Lightnin' played it in triplets, sometimes as a quarter note, sometimes as an eighth note, and he frequently mixed those rhythmic aspects as well, creating a completely extended huge guitar vocabulary. All of this was created from a singular lick that I had been using for years! But I had (previously to meeting Lightnin') never really experimented with changing or adapting the lick/riff to create 'new' sounds.

This was a major breakthrough for a young bluesguy like myself at that time. I couldn't wait to get home and get my guitar out. When I got home ate that night, I did what I

saw Lightnin' do. I began to create my own sense of mixed rhythmic feel and selection of notes. I was off and running.

It really doesn't take me too long to transcribe Lightnin's music because I have a very good idea of where 'he's coming from, having witnessed firsthand his creativity within what some folks find a 'verbatim' blues lick or turnaround.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't say it was easy to play Lightnin' music. That's why I call all of my blues guitar lessons/transcriptions "In The Style of ..." (please see the free guitar lessons on my web site; www.HawkeyeHerman.com). I have to listen real hard to catch Lightnin's subtleties. I can't hear 'em ALL, but I know where he's coming from, and I can catch his 'drift'.

In my humble opinion, replication is, well replication. You're setting yourself up for a fall if you try to replicate only. (i.e. Regarding studying the Masters in any art form, The Mona Lisa has already been painted, so an aspiring painter doesn't try to copy it for any reason other than to learn from it and use the painting techniques of DaVinci; color, contrast, composition, etc., in his/her own effort to create an 'original portrait'. So it is in all art forms, we study the masters who went before us ... learn their techniques ... to create your own vision and expression within the art form).

Lightnin' had a favorite phrase he'd toss out while playing a particularly hot run. He'd grin and say, "You can't touch this!" Well, he was right!!! Nobody can play exactly like him. But the concept of his playing really moved me forward in an exciting way. I'm more interested in understanding the big picture concept of a blues player's style and approach to making music, rather than actual duplication of every note. I like to adapt many country blues guitar styles, use whatever I feel like using whenever I feel like using it, spontaneously, within my own creative wanderings and blues 'experiments.'

I am forever indebted to the great Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins for a memorable lesson in creativity in blues guitar playing, life, and eight ball pool.