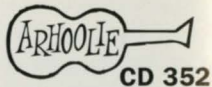


Texas Blues

"The Gold Star Sessions"



1. LIL' SON JACKSON: *Gambling Blues*
2. LIL' SON JACKSON: *Homeless Blues*
3. LIL' SON JACKSON: *Cairo Blues*
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26. ANDY THOMAS: *Angel Child*
27. PERRY CAIN: *All the Way From Texas*

#6 with Lightning Hopkins – piano; # 7, 10, 11, 20, & 21 with Lightning Hopkins – piano; #8 & 9 with Luther "Rocky" Stoneham – guitar; #19 with Leroy Carter – piano, #25 with Elmore Nixon – piano; #26 with Luther Stoneham – guitar and Thunder Smith – piano; #27 with Buster Pickens – piano and Skippy Brown – bass.

All recordings made in Houston, Texas by Bill Quinn between 1947 and 1951, and originally issued as 78 rpm records on his Gold Star label.

Re-issue edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz under exclusive agreement with Mr. & Mrs. Quinn.

Cover by Wayne Pope
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TEXAS BLUES

BILL QUINN'S GOLD STAR RECORDINGS



Texas Blues

Shortly after the end of World War II blues singer **Texas Alexander**, a well-known recording artist some 15 years earlier, was singing on Dowling Street, then a busy thoroughfare in Houston's black business section. His emotional and still powerful voice was accompanied by a young guitar player named **Sam Hopkins**. The two street musicians were performing raw country blues for spare change to an audience, which like themselves, had come to the big city from the fields of the piney woods and the Brazos bottom plantations to the north and west of Houston and from the rice and sugar cane fields of southwest Louisiana, with the hope of finding better paying jobs in industry, transportation, or as domestics.

Beer joints, restaurants, nightclubs, and taverns which catered to these newly arrived "country" folks needed records for their juke boxes which their clientele could identify with and for which they were eager to put their hard-earned nickels into the slot. The *Beer Barrel*

Polka, the Andrew Sisters, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, or Bing Crosby didn't make it with the recent immigrants from the "country," although Louis Jordan was a big hit with just about everyone.

The major national record companies which survived the Depression, had pretty much given up recording regional or ethnic musics during World War II. This was primarily due to the shortage of shellac from which the 78 rpm discs were made but also because the field of American popular, "Hit Parade" music had grown so big that local musics and traditions no longer seemed financially as rewarding. However, as unprecedented numbers of once rural farm laborers made good wages in war-related industries and were ready to spend cash for their favorite entertainment, small entrepreneurs surfaced all over the country hoping to fill the demand for local talent by supplying juke box operators and neighborhood record shops with "street music" in the form of "Down

Home" Blues, Country, Mexican, Cajun and other regionally popular musics.

Lola Anne Cullum, a young talent scout, spotted Texas Alexander and Sam Hopkins playing on Dowling Street. She was scared of the old man but was impressed by young Sam Hopkins and took him, along with pianist **Wilson "Thunder" Smith**, to Los Angeles, where she had established a contact with Ed Messner of Alladin Records, one of the many new record companies specializing in Rhythm & Blues. It was Mrs. Cullum who apparently gave Sam the nickname, "Lightning" while making his first record with pianist "Thunder" Smith. From that first experience in a recording studio, Lightning came out with the hit: *Katie Mae* and he quickly became a nationally known name in the R&B world.

Born and raised in Centerville, in the piney woods north of Houston, Sam Hopkins did not trust the world of showbiz and repeated offers to tour around the country behind his successful records were turned down. Lightning's name and popularity spread via juke

boxes and the radio programs in urban centers all over the country which were beginning to cater to a rapidly growing number of black listeners and presumably purchasers of the sponsors' products. Whenever Lightning needed some extra cash for rent or a gambling debt, he would drive over to the Gold Star Recording studio on Telephone Road where Mrs. Cullum had introduced him to owner **Bill Quinn**. Lightning could always "make a few numbers" and the reward was usually \$75 for every record he committed to wax. Lightning was soon not only the best selling artist for the Gold Star label but was also making sides at Quinn's studio for the Aladdin label. Lightning's success attracted other blues singers to the Gold Star studios and soon Lil' Son Jackson and L. C. Williams had successful releases on the label.

The man responsible for the marvelous recording sessions at the Gold Star studios was Bill Quinn. Bill was born January 8, 1903 in Aimsbury, Mass. of Irish background. He learned how to play the Irish button accordion but his



Bill Quinn – 1960 (photo by Chris Strachwitz)

favorite instrument was the organ. According to his second wife Wanda Lee, Bill really loved the bass notes on the organ and to her dismay played every song in F sharp, a key she could hardly sing in! Bill had studied electronics and found a job as the sound equipment man for Royal American

Shows, a carnival company out of New Jersey. One year, on their way to Florida for the winter, Bill, his wife Lona and young son Earl drove over to Houston to visit Lona's sister. Outside of town the car broke an axle and they were stranded on the poor north side. Bill, however, had already decided to stay in Houston

and was soon earning money repairing radios. One day a fellow wanted a home disc recorder repaired and when Bill saw the machine, he became fascinated with the whole process of recording. Quinn soon purchased a disc recorder and opened a repair shop on Telephone Road where he began recording people who wanted to send voice messages to their soldier relatives and friends overseas. At that time you could buy recording blanks made of cardboard base and covered with a plastic coating into which the grooves were cut. By 1942 Bill was also producing jingles and commercials at his small studio and so he was in the record business! Bill told me that his first commercial record release was *When We Planted Old Glory In Japan* by Tex Moon (whose real name was Woody Vernon) and it was released on the Gulf label. The company was started in partnership with his good friend Woody Woodworth who tried to be a singer but was a cement contractor by profession.

During the war Bill Quinn and his partner set up a single press and learned how to make not only the acetate

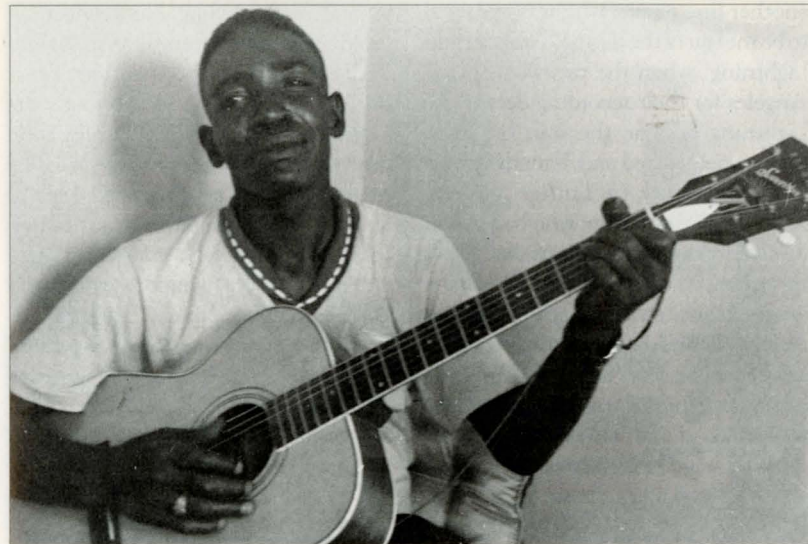
recordings but also how to process them and form the metal masters. Due to the shellac shortage during the war they had difficulty getting material for their records and would hold "biscuit days" from time to time when the public was asked to bring in their old records and were paid 10 cents each so they could be melted down and used for new pressings. The nice OK and Columbia discs which had a piece of stiff paper in the center to make them less breakable, were probably rejected, or, they may have contributed to the bad surface noise of the Gulf discs! Quinn had a hard time not only learning how to press records but how to process his master acetates and prepare the stampers. There was no book to learn this from and the big companies apparently refused to share their secrets. Nevertheless Bill persevered and in 1946 he started Gold Star Records. "King of the Hillbillies" ran the legend across the center of the label. The first two releases were very successful: *Kilroy Was Here* and *Jole Blon*, the latter by the remarkable Cajun fiddler **Harry Choates** whom Bill heard at a tavern on the Beaumont

Highway (the record is now available on ARH CD/C 331 **J'ai Ete Au Bal: The Cajun & Zydeco Music of Louisiana - Vol. 1** and for details see notes to the full CD by **Harry Choates: Fiddle King Of Cajun Swing** - ARH CD-380). Bill discovered that hillbilly, cajun, and blues artists were relatively easy and inexpensive to record and that the market was crying for this type of material. *Jole Blon* became so successful along the Gulf Coast that Bill licensed it out to the up and coming Modern label in Los Angeles which promised to give the record national distribution. Since none of them knew anything about copyrights, the song was soon "covered" by Roy Acuff and even pop stars on major national labels, without Harry Choates nor Bill Quinn getting any part of the action.

Bill Quinn's was the first studio in Houston and perhaps in the entire South. In 1947 he made his first records with Lightning Hopkins' *Short Haired Woman* and *Big Mama Jump* on Gold Star #3131 which became the label's first blues release. (All of Lightning's Gold Star

recordings are available now on Arhoolie CD 330 and CD 337). The record became quite a regional hit and from then on Quinn started his "600" blues series. Gold Star never achieved national distribution but sales were brisk via newly formed independent record distributors who, like the labels, sprang up all over the country to meet the demand for blues and hillbilly music. Quinn's studio was soon used to supply Aladdin with Hopkins masters as well. Lightning was in his prime and produced a stream of recordings over the next several years which are without doubt some of his best.

Not only did Lightning become Gold Star's best selling solo blues artist, but he introduced many other fine blues singers to Bill Quinn, usually friends or acquaintances, whom he frequently accompanied on guitar or piano. The most gifted of these singers was the amiable but ill-starred singer, drummer, and dancer, **L. C. Williams**. I recall when we asked him what L.C. stood for, his slow and drawn-out reply was: "love crazy"! Born in Millican, Texas in 1924,



Melvin "Lil' Son" Jackson - 1960 (photo by Chris Strachwitz)

L. C. was influenced by Hopkins' style of singing and on his first record the label even reads: "Lightnin' Jr." L. C. suffered from tuberculosis and was addicted to cheap wine and there was an ominous hint in the title of "I Won't Be Here Long." L. C. died at the age of 36 on October 18, 1960.

The accompanist on that song was **Elmore Nixon**, one of the many fine pianists from East Texas. Elmore Nixon also recorded under his own name and was frequently used by Clifton Chenier for recording sessions for Arhoolie Records in the 1960s.

Wilson "Thunder" Smith was voice

another fine pianist who was expected to be the star of the duo of "Thunder and Lightning" when the two went to Los Angeles for their recording debuts. As Lightning became the star, however, the partners parted and Thunder found another partner in **Luther "Rocky Mountain" Stoneham**, who had grown up in the country near Huntsville, Texas. Stoneham is heard at his best against the simple piano chords of *Big Stars Are Falling*. Thunder Smith also recorded solo, *Santa Fe Blues* being his version of a standard train piece that is almost the trademark of the Texas blues pianist. *Back To Santa Fe* is still another variant on the local blues classic by a little-known but much esteemed pianist from Wiergate, Texas - **Lee Hunter**. Lee was characteristic of the self-effacing bluesman who preferred to play in the barrel houses to recording and working in the "ritzy joints." Thousands of blues and popular music fans who will never hear of Lee have and will have been entertained by his celebrated brother, Ivory Joe Hunter.

Besides Lightning Hopkins, the

second most popular blues singer on Gold Star was another guitarist, **Melvin "Lil' Son" Jackson**. Born in Tyler, Texas on August 17, 1916, he was four years Lightning's junior. The family soon moved to a farm near Berry, Texas where he spent most of his childhood. Melvin learned to play guitar from his father, Johnnie Jackson, who worked as a share cropper, and from his mother who played guitar in the Holiness Church. His favorite records were those by Blind Lemon Jefferson. At age 16 he ran away from home, formed a small group called The Blue Eagle Four, worked as a mechanic and played guitar and sang the blues for his own satisfaction. In 1944 Melvin Jackson was drafted in the army and saw service in Wales, France, and Germany. Upon discharge in March of 1946 he returned to Dallas to work as a mechanic. One day several friends encouraged him to send a recording he had made in an amusement arcade booth to Bill Quinn in Houston. The two songs on the disc were *Roberta* and *2:16*. A few days later a telegram brought Son Jackson to Houston where, in his taut



Left to Right: "Long Gone" Miles, L. C. Williams, Lightning Hopkins, & Valerie Oliver - 1960
(photo by Chris Strachwitz)

and personal style of guitar, he eventually made the ten sides heard here. Jackson played a more persistently rhythmic accompaniment than did Lightning Hopkins, whose guitar tended to meander with his voice. Together they characterize Texas guitar styles of the 1950s, while incorporating the traditions

established by Blind Lemon Jefferson in the 1920s. Melvin Jackson died sometime in the mid 1970s.

From 1947 to 1952 Bill Quinn recorded a remarkable body of fine blues. Many of the recordings never saw the light of day. Wright Holmes, for example, a very fine down home

blues singer and guitarist, recorded two sides for Gold Star and was paid the customary \$75. Bill Quinn decided not to release the record because he felt the singer sounded too much like Lightning Hopkins who was his best seller. Other recordings, Bill told me, never "came out of the tank" which meant the acetate disc on which the recording was made, did not peel off the metal master in the electrolysis process and since no copies were made of the original acetates, the performance was lost for ever! Some recordings, like *Jazz Blues* by Lightning Hopkins, came out of the tank OK but once Quinn pressed his initial run of 100 copies, which he sent out to the local juke box operators, he got a flurry of complaining calls, telling him that the record had a bad hum. No further pressings were made, accounting for the extreme rarity of that item. Other releases however sold in the range of several thousand up to 100,000 and more for hits like *Jole Blond* and Lightning's *Short Haired Woman*.

Unfortunately the success of Gold Star Records was also the cause of its

eventual demise in 1952. As Lightning Hopkins became a national best-seller on the "Rhythm & Blues" radio and record charts, other entrepreneurs came to town to record him as he did not appear to be under any exclusive contract. Bill Quinn was kind enough to co-operate with most of these "record men," especially Morty and Bob Shad, and let them use his facilities for their extensive recording projects. Bill told me that the first time Bob Shad came to Houston, Shad apparently placed ads on the radio or in the paper asking for talent to show up at the Gold Star studios. The next day when Bill, who lived right next to his studio, got up and looked out the window, he saw a long, long line of black men apparently waiting for the chance to audition with the hope of putting their musical talents on tape.

Mrs. Quinn felt it was largely the Mercury recordings by Lightning Hopkins, recorded by Morty Shad, which killed sales for Lightning's Gold Star discs. Mercury had national distribution reaching into every record shop in the US. In addition to losing Lightning to

the competition, Harry Choates died tragically in an Austin, Texas jail cell after he also had gone to record for various other labels. But the main reason for the demise of Gold Star Records was probably the US government. At that time there was a federal excise tax collected on the sale of all phonograph records. Bill Quinn was under the impression that the pressing plants were paying this tax but apparently not so! When the US government slapped a \$26,000.00 fine and penalty on Gold Star Records, Bill quit record production and went back to operating a custom studio which recorded many major artists like George Jones and the Big Bopper. Quinn and the federales eventually settled for the giant sum of \$ 250.00 but the ordeal had cost thousands of dollars in lawyer and bookkeeper's fees and of course the terror of the government can be devastating to anyone's psyche. By 1952 Bill had lost his wife Lona to cancer and his life was obviously at a very low point.

Through a good friend Bill Quinn met Wanda Lee in 1952 and they soon

married. In 1956 he opened the new larger Gold Star studios where I had the pleasure of recording Clifton Chenier in the early 60s. During the brief five years of the existence of Gold Star Records, Bill Quinn recorded some of the finest Texas country blues and most of them are heard on this and the two CDs by Lightning Hopkins. Bill Quinn died in Houston on December 4, 1975 but his recorded legacy will live on.

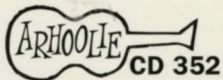
*(Chris Strachwitz - 1992 -
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