There's a tinsmith on Houston's narrow, throbbing West Dallas Street who's watched the shuffling crowds pass his window for more than forty years. He's seen all the great Texas blues minstrels begging up and down the sidewalk.

When the shop first opened, it was the hulking figure of Blind Lemon Jefferson who came with a guitar in one hand, a folding chair in the other, to sit at the corner and moan his songs in a voice like a gasping trombone. O-o-o-oh! Black snake crawlin' in my room.

Between brawls and prison terms Leadbelly spent his time dodging from one bar to another with his 12-string guitar, singing the ballads and chain gang songs that had just won him a pardon from the Texas Prison System.

Lawn, I been down yonder where the lights burn all night long . . .

Blind Willie Johnson wandered by dangling a tin cup and shouting his blues-patterned spirituals.

When I get to heaven gonna sit and tell,
Tell them angels ring dem bells.

Texas Alexander worked the street with youthful Lonnie Johnson providing the guitar accompaniment.

White man born with a veil over his face, could see the trouble before it taken place.

In recent years the undisputed monarch of the street has been a lanky, animated man whose songs are a mixture of the traditional motifs and his own casually made improvisations.

If I miss the train, I got a big black horse to ride.

Like the minstrels before him who've come bubbling out of the East Texas "Pinie Woods," his songs speak the esoteric language of the blistering cotton lands and river bottom prisons. The guitar sets the mood, underscores the sharply drawn tales of poverty, gambling, bad men, hard work, and escape. A flow of imp-like gestures and mocking asides to the circle of listeners makes the songs as personal as an intimate conversation.

Well, I come down here with my guitar in my hand,
I'm lookin' for a woman who's lookin' for a man.

Sam Lightnin' Hopkins is unaware of contemporary jazz-and-poetry, yet he is one of its finest exponents. He lopes through Houston's Negro wards singing about a bus strike, about a fight with his wife, about evil-doing of the mythical Jack-stopper. He meets a friend out of a job and a moment later a lightly rocking boogie figure sets the background for a broken verse line of patter about the pains of job hunting. After a moment of whispering in some girl's ear, his guitar chops out bitter, ringing cries as he half-talks, half-sings the ironies of being a man in world full of fickle women. A line can have the blunt stab of T. S. Eliot:

you ever see a one-eyed woman cry?

In another moment Lightnin' can become a playwright, staging acting and ad-libbing the dialogue of some spontaneously conceived drama. It may be about a vagrant farm boy coming home from prison, pausing to ask worried questions of a neighbor, and wryly capsuling his own experience:

bad on me . . . and you know it was a shame on everyone else.
For the greater part of his 47 years this has been Lightnin’s contribution to his oddly-private society—the dependent but isolated Negro wards of a southern city. He is a fascinatingly complete man; even the least of his routine actions seem in tune with the earthy cynicism that characterizes his songs. A man with a tribal sense of belonging to his culture, he is outside the modern dilemma. Lightnin’ the man is the same as Lightnin’ the artist. Rising from a tangle of bed clothes in a cheap rented room to breakfast on two bottles of beer, he’s fully attuned to the tragic sense of life. “Now is the time,” he’s liable to mutter, “any other time and I may be dead and gone. So I can’t help but get up and sing the blues...”

The essence of Lightnin’s art is a special form of autobiography. His songs all have their basis in actual experience which he recaptures with dramatic gravity and a gift for succinct detail. At times he generalizes, just as often he simply reminisces. One such is of a ritual soup prepared for birthday parties at his home: “... every time the ground cracked, ole Pa gets a ‘tater. Ma says ‘Look around here’ and there she stands with a ‘mater. ... They used to call it Bunion Stew.’”

In both song and conversation Lightnin’ often looks back to his family and life in the Piney Woods: “All my daddy could do was shoot people and call set—you know, call set for square dancing and all that? He wasn’t nothing, my daddy. My mamma is Frances Hopkins—she’s 76 years old now and she always say, ‘Sam, I depend on you,’ and I always say, ‘Mamma, you know I’m here.’ “Used to pick cotton, make forty cents a hundred. Times was kinda hard then. Make fourteen dollars and give my mamma seven. There’s my sister and two brothers living but I take care of her, go back all the time just to see her. Sundays I’d sing for the church just to make her happy. It was in the church they let me fool with the organ and the piano, and I learn to play them too. I’d sing them sanctified songs but not so much ‘cause mostly I’m with the blues.

“When I was eight, nine years old, there wasn’t no flour in the barrel and I walked away from there with a guitar slung across my shoulder and a-singin’ ’I’m gonna trip this town, and I ain’t gonna trip no more.’ I’m from up at Leon County—that’s about half way between Houston and Dallas. Fact of the matter, town where I was born is called Centerville because of that. And I was born March 15—you know the government made that day into income tax day—March 15, 1912.

“All them blues singing people come from up there. Right next to where I’m from it’s Limestone County where Blind Lemon is from. Across the Trinity River, it’s Houston County and that’s where Texas Alexander came from—he was my first cousin. When I was just a little boy I went to hanging around Buffalo, Texas where all them preachers came together for them association meetings. Blind Lemon, he’d come too and do his kind of preaching and I’d just get up alongside and start playing with him. He never run me off like he did them others who’d try. So I complimented ole Blind Lemon on I walk from Dallas, I walk to Wichita Falls and You ain’t got no mama now (Black Snake Moan). Just a little kid I was.

“At that time I was working for a white family and they treat me just the same as their own boys. They treat me so good I thought I was just as good. They taken me in because I was hungry. I did work around the house and they sent me to school and all. Then I didn’t know about things; it was later I found out I wasn’t supposed to be as good as white people. Yeah, I was half grown before I found out about some people’d call you ‘son of a bitch’ or ‘nigger’ and it didn’t mean nothing. Other people’d say the same words and it’d mean you something lower’n animals. So I took to living off gambling and my singing—never had nothing to do with people that call me ‘boy’ and then wait for me to say ‘yessuh.”

“I stay with my own people. I have all my fun, and I have all my trouble with them. Trouble, yeah. One time I had to cut a man that kept foolin’ with me and that put me in the county farm up at Houston County. Several times I had them chains around my legs for stuff I’d got into.

Another time—it was the night before I was supposed to go into the army—I was in a gambling game and I took an old boy’s money. That fool waited outside for me and when I came out he slipped a grizzly knife right in close to my heart. That took care of the army. I laid up in that Jeff Davis hospital and made a song about all the men going across the water, all the women staying home with me.

“I been married nine times and everyone of them gals I stayed with has a song I made up about her... Katie Mae, Ida, Glory Bee. I ran a little policy around town.
had me a secret gambling place, maybe even had a few money women on the line, but I gave up all that when I started recording. Recorded here in Houston, out in California, once in New York. Don't you know that's a lot of records? But mostly I got cheated out of my royalties. One time I got $5100 royalties but most the time I didn't get nothing. Once it was $2500 I was supposed to get and didn't. I was gonna get a lawyer on it, but he was here, and he couldn't do nothing out there. Plenty people cheated me, singing my songs. All them songs. I made 'em up. Make up a song about everything that happens. The time I was in Los Angeles I sang them My California and the time they called me to New York I sang 'I come a long way from Texas to shake glad hands with you'...

Lightnin's recording career is dotted with songs reflecting his highly private moods. A hang-over turned into Lightnin' Don't Feel Well and a personal phobia became Airplane Blues. He refuses to sing one song of protest, Tim Moore's Farm, because after its release on the now defunct Gold Star label Mr. Moore's brothers paid Lightnin' a visit. His most famous composition is a narrative of a woman's costly attempts to have her hair straightened. Short Haired Woman (reprinted, The Jazz Review, May, 1959) typifies Lightnin's orphic mannered handling of subjects and problems close to the heart of his environment.

I went to make a swing out with my woman and a "rat" fell from her head like one from a burning barn.

Lacking the guile and aggressive ambition of others who have been led far afield by rock 'n' roll, Lightnin' has never been a success in the terms understood by the music industry. Despite his nearly 200 recordings (scattered on Aladdin, Gold Star, Modern, Score, Jax, Sittin' In, Herald, RPM, Decca, TNT, Harlem, Chart, Ace, and Mercury) only glimpses of his personality are to be found in these sides. Recording directors have consistently forced tasteless material, amplified guitars, and heavy-handed drummers on these sessions.

He first came to the attention of the music business just after World War II when a virtual pipeline to the west fed Texas artists to Los Angeles record companies.

Shaping the experimental models of what is now rock 'n' roll: a form of the blues designed by sound engineers for the thump and screech acoustics of a jukebox. Aladdin records asked a Houston businesswoman to locate an authentic country blues artist (Capitol Records had recently recorded Leadbelly and the other labels were suspecting a trend). She found Texas Alexander and Lightnin' on Houston's Dowling Street. Alexander had just been released from prison and was eager to resume his recording career (64 sides on the early Okeh and Vacation labels) which had been cut short by his conviction. Making a good story out of a sordid incident and trying to ease the woman's fear of Alexander, Lightnin' told her the man had been sent to prison for one of his records about "she got box back nittles and great noble thighs. she works under cover with a boar hog's eye." But the lady refused to have anything to do with the aging blues singer (Alexander died about 1955, forgotten and never again recorded). A trip to Los Angeles was arranged that included Lightnin and two boogie-styled pianists, Amos Milburn and Thunder Smith. A recording session was held at the RKO studios with several movie stars standing around, delighted by Lightnin's raw, traditional art. Song writers who had prepared material in keeping with the current trends despairied as Lightnin used it merely as a basis for his own impromptu verse. Engineers cursed as two takes of the same title were found to be utterly different songs. While in Los Angeles, he was outfitted with an amplified guitar and a small combo and booked into dance halls. He was saddled with the name Lightnin because "when I did Rocky Mountain where I'm fast with my fingers they said 'we'll call you Lightnin.' Refusing to accept the mold into which he was being pressed, and disgusted with the process, Lightnin returned to Houston's sidewalks.

He has continued to record but refused any other dealings with music industry. His fear of alien territory (the world outside Texas) and his unpredictable streaks of self-assertion have put off subsequent offers of bookings on the rock 'n' roll circuit. Lately there have been offers from the concert-hall field which, since the death of Big Bill Broonzy, lacks any comparable artist in the blues idiom. With the urging of friends his qualms have gradually abated and he recently appeared on the Houston Folklore Group's "Hootenanny in the Round" held on the Alley Theater's arena stage. It was his first appearance before a large gathering of white people as well as his first formal concert. "Things that's different always make me hold back," Lightnin said explaining his caution, "but they seemed to like me and that makes me like to sing."

In the same leery fashion he's mused the possibilities of traveling to Europe. "I get to thinking about all the women over there — and then I get to thinking all that water to cross:" Lightnin does not understand the outside world and is only slightly tempted by what it offers. Fame does not appeal to him — as a man adulated throughout Houston's Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wards, he regards wider fame as unimportant. Lightnin's seldom mentions his birthplace because his friends are busy claiming him from their own hometown; walking half a block along Dowling Street he'll stop to exchange mystical comments and promissory kisses with half a dozen young ladies. The possibility of money always interests him. But he knows it will disappear in flurry of hand-outs, gambling, and spending.

This year, however, brought one marked change in his career. For the first time he was recorded singing, talking, and playing according to the bent of his own personality. In these documentary recordings filled with extemporary comment and verse — 8 selections released on a Folkways lp and 15 selections on a Tradition lp — he sings his own unique blues, about a twister howling across Texas, about a chain gang in the Trinity River bottom, about the women he likes to exhort with the cry "Okay, now... Twist it!"