LIGHTNIN HOPKINS came to the recording studio on February 20, 1962 direct from his landlady's TV set where, in step with most of America, he'd spent the morning spellbound by John Glenn's orbital flight in th'e Friendship 7.

Less than three hours after Lt. Col. Glenn hit the water, Lightnin had "rimed up" sung, and recorded his happy tribute to the astronaut.

Because the record industry is notorious for its fads and schemes, on the surface this song may seem to be the result of some businessman's bright idea. It is not. The impulse which set it in motion, one which lies close to the heart of the blues tradition, is something distinct and individual.

This is not to suggest that Lightnin is at all unwilling to cash in on circumstances, for indeed he is ever willing to do just that, but it is enthusiasm not contrivance that moves him. He lacks, for example, the cunning of the postal authorities who secretly prepared the U. S. Man In Space 4c stamp and had it ready for immediate sale in order to wring the maximum propaganda value from Glenn's flight. Or, again, Lightnin lacks the all too evident premeditation that went into Glenn's own headline-styled phrase: "All systems go."

Lightnin' is simply another breed of man. He moves by whim and fancy. He was fascinated by Glenn's flight into space. It caught his imagination, it awed him, and because he is an impulsive blues-maker, it produced in him a song.

In the course of a year, Lightnin will produce several dozen songs of topical interest. When royalty visited Chicago, he made up a Blues for Queen Elizabeth and one night last fall while playing a street dance as the wind gusts threatened to push him off the outdoor platform where he sat, he reshaped an old song to begin...

Lord, turn your hurricane the other way.

But most of them, like that song about Hurricane Carla, are lost as the impulse and the circumstances which occasioned it fade away. That Happy Blues for John Glenn was caught in a recording session is an accident resulting entirely from the flight having fallen on the date for which studio time had been booked. Ordinarily, it would never have been heard outside a few dance halls like the Sputnik Bar, Irene's, and the Silver Dollar #2. Ordinarily, he would have forgotten it in a night or two, and as a matter of fact at this writing Lightnin says he can't remember the song though the recording will give him the chance to recapture it.

But on that Tuesday afternoon it was uppermost in his thoughts. He arrived at the studio an hour early, in itself a rare event presaging things to come. As members of his entourage unloaded instruments and ran his errands, he sat out back in his car. At one point he asked for a piece of paper and, with a nod at the Gettysburg Address legend, a torn envelope was provided. His making notes for the song was essentially a symbolic act for a half-hour later the envelope contained only three marks resembling hex signs. Nonetheless he insisted on propping it up in front of him as he took his place beneath the microphone. In some way the cryptic marks identified for him the incidents he wished to touch upon, and with it in place, he was ready to extemporize. He called for a last minute conference to confirm Glenn's first name and whispered his question because, child-like, he intended to surprise those present (including the musicians who accompany him) with his song's subject.

The surprise and the first take were ruined by a sudden short in the guitar amplifier. It had been a moody blues set to the same tune as the bitter protest Tom Moore's Farm. While the repairs were in progress, Lightnin read a newspaper account of Glenn's flight and some* detail there seems to have altered his concept for when he launched into the song again, is was definitely a happy blues.
As a reporting historian Lightnin's bias is deeply personal. He recounts the space flight in the same artless fashion as he tells of an argument between his parents (Coffee Blues) or speaks of a night when a pounding heart caused him "to sit straight up in my bed." (Walking This Road By Myself.) In relating the space flight he reveals himself most impressed by the TV interview with John Glenn's mother who spoke of her little boy who always wanted to go to th'e airport and watch the planes. If Lightning has any one consistent philosophy it is that children are the happy people in this world.

In many songs, as for example Good Morning Little School Girl*, his view is that of a child and then it is a bright one, a "boy born for joy." But when he speaks as an adult, his thoughts are jaded, worried, mistreated, cynical. And the word black reoccurs as it does in three of the titles presented here.

Lightning is out of step with the changes that have taken place during his half-century (he turned 50 a few weeks after the last of these recordings were made). He has heard the blues evolve from telling about stubborn mules and cotton-high wagons to the train that runs through Joe Pullum's depression-era Black Gal:

She caught the Katy . . . and I swing on behind . . .

His blues have ranged from the forthright bawdiness of Black Cadillac to a fearful description of a DC-7 (included in his "Blues In th'e Bottle" album). But even as he sings about a flight through space, Lightnin is a man in transition and his dress typifies it: greased hair and gilt-edged sunglasses, a white collar shirt, a Texian string tie, and a chamarra from a Mexican handloom. As a man he mocks and carps at the devil, berates the women who dog him around, and wails over his worried life, but it is with sincere delight that he thinks of John Glenn's triple orbit of the earth, not for its scientific or political values, but because it fulfilled the dreams of a small boy.

This is the first time that Lightnin has been accompanied on record by a group of the musicians who regularly play with him in Houston. In their company Lightnin uses an amplified guitar and the sound here suggests what can be heard nightly in the city's dance halls, sans the uproar and frenzy of the audience. 62-year old, 132-pound powerhouse drummer Spider Kilpatrick is Lightnin's most regular companion at such events. Harmonica player Billy Bizor, pianist Buster Pickens, and bass man Don Cook work with him spasmodically as they have been doing for more than a decade. Since Lightnin is a self-determined instrumentalist, recognizing no orthodoxy save his own, it is difficult for most musicians to accompany him. In his home town he has built up a select group of men, taught them, warped them, or instilled in them the ability to anticipate his next move. Mixed with these selections are four songs in which Lightnin uses the acoustical guitar, and a style closer to that cf his day as a sidewalk minstrel.