



# TEXAS BLUES TAPES

## THE TARY OWENS INTERVIEWS



Nathaniel 'Bill' Barnes. Photo: Tary Owens.

Around twenty years ago, the Texas folklorist, musician and producer, Tary Owens (who died in 2003), sent *B&R* a number of audio cassette interviews with Texas blues artists. Sadly, the tapes were 'lo-fi' and suffered from background noise or electronic interference, making them too difficult to transcribe. So they were stored away. Now we have been able to clean them up enough to make transcriptions possible for publication. We will be featuring them as an occasional series in forthcoming editions as 'Tary Owen's Texas Tapes'.

The first are short interviews with Nathaniel 'Bill' Barnes and Newton 'Hoss' Nelson. Both artists had tracks on Tary's 1993 Texas blues compilation of field recordings called 'Ruff Stuff - The Roots Of Texas Guitar', issued in 1993 on his Catfish label (CTF 1003). Barnes recorded two sides in Austin, Texas ('Jack Of Diamonds Is A Hard Card To Play' and 'What's Wrong Baby') on 9th October 1965.

*Nathaniel 'Bill' Barnes was interviewed by Tary in Houston 1988. Some of his recollections are hazy (as are the dates) and were repetitive. He did the interview while strumming his guitar.*

### Where were you born and when did you first start playing blues?

I was born in 1910 in D'Lo, Mississippi. That is in Simpson County. My father's name was Joe Barnes, my mother was 'Lela', she is still alive and is 103 and she will be 104 on August 23rd.

My father played drums and a little guitar - he was a farmer. We moved to a place they called Mississippi Hill. They called it that because all of the people came from Mississippi - from Hattisburg, Jackson, Vicksburg. We moved from there to McKenzie Bend, right down the river, called Cairo and we stayed there until 1918.

I started playing blues when my daddy showed me the first three chords (demonstrates the chords on his guitar). I played in the Holiness Church in 1927. Then I left and went to a little old town, nine miles away, right by the Eastern State prison.

The first guitar player I ever heard was my cousin, Jimmy. Other guys I heard play music were Johnny Powell and Frank Powell and Willie Bell from Mississippi.

In 1928 I moved to a little old place called Vistoula, about three miles from Trinity River. That's where I met Lightnin' Hopkins and his brothers.

A. B. Hopkins, he was Lightnin's oldest brother, he got killed. We played to a little coloured community called the Black Land Quarter, about six miles from the Eastern State prison farm. Then we played at the Wallace Allen Farm.

*NB: Tary's notes to the Catfish album say he didn't meet Lightnin' Hopkins until the 1940s.*

### What songs did you play back then?

'Baby Please Don't Go', 'Comine', 'Short Haired Woman', 'C. C. Rider', 'Black Gal', 'Baby Please Don't Go', 'What's Wrong Baby', 'Easy Street' - so many like 'I ain't gonna give you women no more of my cherry ball.' A lot of them I would make up and put something together.

### Did you play with other guitar players?

I played by myself, sometimes they would come in with a guitar, some would play lead. They would include Lightnin' Hopkins (we called him Sam) and a guy called Charlie. We called him Coon for short. He came from up there at White

Rock. And a guy called Dan Bailey, he came off the prison farm, he was better than Coon at the time - he was the best one.

This was in 1935 or 1936, maybe 1937 to 1939. Dan Bailey - he died in Nevada. He played with a bottle, I played the guitar with a knife. We also played church songs.

### Where did you play?

Mississippi Hill, Low Bottom, Stomp Mill, some farms down by the river, we played Midway. Tin-Top, that was nine miles out of Madisonville. We played with old fiddlers, guitar players - but I don't remember their names - one guy who played the guitar was called 'Brownskin'. One played the fiddle, one played the guitar, one played a horn. One was a tall dark man, one was a short 'pop-eyed' man - he would blow the horn.

They would come into the place and leave in the morning. We played through the night and drink whiskey. Four or five guitar players playing different times. We played to farmers.

### Did you play full time?

No, I was pickin' cotton on the Murray Farm in Crockett, Texas, sixteen miles from Trinity. We would play just at night. At least four or five guitar players playing at different times.

I went there in 1934 stayed there till '39 for five years. I left the Murray Farm and moved to Houston.

I played in Houston by myself and played with Wright Holmes and another boy - a guy called Luther. Can't recall his name. I played with him mostly up on the street on the North side. This would be 1940 or 1941.

Wright Holmes, knew him. Wright met a lady in Trinity Gardens, she belonged to a church and after him and her got married he quit playing blues. I did know the record he made.

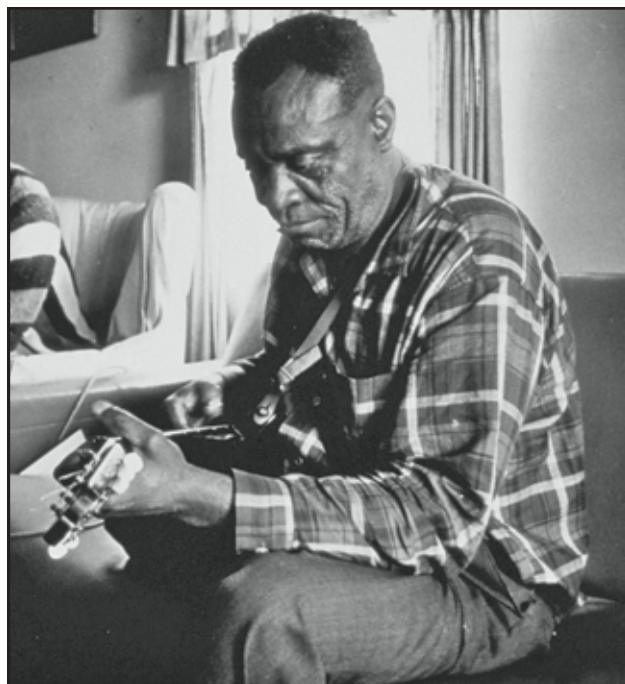
They were local players - not recording artists. There were lots more than that but I believe that was all.

We would hang around a place called Willie's Grill. They was mostly guitar players and drums, sometimes somebody would come in with a horn. I played with Lightnin' Hopkins in the Third Ward on West Gray Street and the 9-8 Club.

*NB: Wright Holmes recorded for Gold Star (unissued), Miltone and Gotham in 1947.*

### Did you meet any other artists who were recording?

T-Bone Walker, Gatemouth Brown, James 'Widemouth' Brown, Big Mama Maybelle (sic), Pee Wee Crayton - he was a guitar player. Lonnie Johnson, he was at the Downtown Grill in Houston.



Wright Holmes. Photo possibly by Larry Skoog.



### What else did you do for a living?

When the war started I went to work in steel on the graveyard shift in the Brown's Shipyards after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

We played church music with the Silver Gate Singers. We were first called the Silver Gate Gospel Singers, which was a group formed to entertain the troops. We would rehearse with a guitar, but a lot of the Baptist church wouldn't let you come in with a guitar.

We met in the Third Ward at Dave Powell's house, myself, Ed Mathews. This was from 1941 to 1948. They quit singing around '48.

At this point the interview is drowned out by electronic interference. However, according to other information Bill Barnes worked driving a truck for the McKenzie Furniture Company, in Houston. He also played a night club called the Dew Drop Inn in the 1950s and played in a band with O.J. Williams, called O.J. Williams and The Sons.

It was reported by the Houston Metropolitan Research Centre, Houston Public Library, that Barnes made some recordings in the 1940s as well as the sides for Tary Owens - which he refused to allow to be released as he played only religious music. It has been reported that he never returned to playing blues and spent his remaining days playing organ for churches in Houston.

However, Tary Owens in his notes to the Catfish album, says Barnes was playing blues on Houston's Lyon's Avenue in the Fifth Ward 'as recently as 1991'. He was still residing in Houston and had recently recorded again.

**Nathaniel 'Bill' Barnes died on 22nd February 1995 in Houston**

*Newton 'Hoss' Nelson Interviewed 6th October 1988*

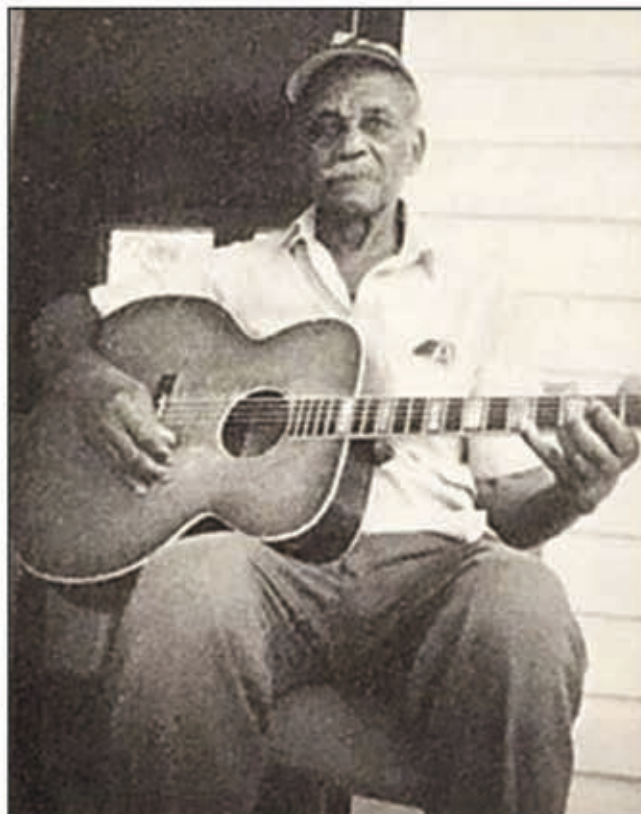
Newton 'Hoss' Nelson and his brother Oscar 'Preacher' Nelson recorded two sides for Tary Owens on 16th April 1966 in Cameron, Texas: 'Broke And Ain't Got A Dime' and 'Alcohol Blues'. They were also issued on the 'Ruff Stuff - The Roots Of Texas Guitar' album. They feature vocals and fiddle by Preacher Nelson and guitar by Hoss Nelson. The interview with Hoss, which was at the end of a cassette was very short. Hoss was no longer playing. According to the sleeve notes of the Catfish album the Nelson brothers stopped playing around 1935.

### Where were you born and raised?

My name is Newton Nelson. I was born 6th October 1907 in Minera, Milam County, Texas. My brother, 'Preacher', was Oscar Nelson. He was born in 1901. He died in 1984 (13th March). He played guitar and violin, he could play both of them.



Oscar 'Preacher' Nelson and Hoss Nelson. Photo: Tary Owens.



Newton 'Hoss' Nelson. Photo: Tary Owens.

### Did he teach you to play the guitar?

No, I didn't learn to play the guitar from him. I learned guitar from a guy called Richard Bailey; he's been dead a long time. We were all from Cameron and from a place called Griffin Chapel.

My daddy played fiddle - he was also Oscar Nelson. My brother was named after him. He taught my brother to play the fiddle. I can't remember when I learned to play the guitar - but it was around 1920.

### Where did you play - what songs did you play back then?

'C. C. Rider', a song called 'Brownskin Woman' and 'West Texas Blues'. 'Out And Down' - that's 'One Thin Dime'.

We played for country suppers for dances, the white folks. We played the same pieces we played for blacks. I played those with my brother. All over the place, country balls, we played in Rockdale. I never did play nightclubs.

### Did you know the Bells or the Craytons? Did Blind Lemon Jefferson ever come through here?

No I don't recall him coming through, if he did I don't recall it. Don't know the Bells but I know the Craytons, they had a band down there.

**Newton 'Hoss' Nelson died on 21st May, 1995 in Cameron, Texas.**

The 'Ruff Stuff - The Roots of Texas Texas Guitar' features sides recorded by Tary Owens between 1964 and 1966 and features recordings by Lee Mackay, Willie Manifee, Mance Lipscomb, Bill Neeley, Babe Stovall, T.J. Jackson and Jimmy Nelson (not to be confused with Jimmy 'T99' Nelson).

## Reunion

On September 4, 1976, descendants and friends of the Nelson family met at the Fiesta Grounds in Cameron.

A short program started the celebration with Mrs. Frank Walker of Austin presiding. Prayer was recited by Rev. Boyd of Rockdale.

The history of the family was given by Mrs. Willie V. Morgan of Bremond. Gifts were presented to persons traveling the farthest. A flower was presented to Mrs. Artelia Lewis from Griffin Chapel by Mrs. Poole. Mrs. Lewis represented the Mother of five generations. A token was presented to Oscar Nelson (Preacher) and Newton Nelson (Hoss) for an example of togetherness exemplified by the two brothers.

A barbecue dinner was served to all.

A baseball game was played and enjoyed by all.

From the Cameron Herald, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1976.