

West Helena Blues

Written by bluesever
Tuesday, 21 July 2015 08:36 -

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Located across the Mississippi from Clarksdale, Helena, Arkansas was a thriving wide-open port town during the '30s and '40s. The main street Cherry, which paralleled the levee, had dozens of white saloons, while Elm Street, running just behind, had dozens of black. Bluesmen from all over – Johnny Shines, Robert Johnson, Howlin Wolf, Sunnyland Slim and Roosevelt Sykes – congregated here by the dozens, knowing they could get work. Memphis Minnie sang about “Rechin’ Pete” an unpopular policeman who patrolled Cherry Street. Roosevelt Sykes wrote a song called “**West Helena Blues**”.

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Bluesman Cedell Davis, who was born in Helena in 1926, remembered the old days in a 1976 interview: *“They could go to town and stay ‘till maybe 9 or 12 o’clock [in Mississippi towns], they’d get out, you see. But now, Helena, you didn’t have to worry about no time, all day, you know what I mean like that. Well, anything that you wanted to spend money on or buy, it was there. All you had to do was look around, it was there.”*



Cherry Street, Helena 1920

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Roosevelt Sykes was born on January 31, 1906, in Elmar, Arkansas, a community he later described as *“just a little sawmill town.”* In 1909, Sykes moved with his family to St. Louis, Missouri. He often returned to his grandfather's farm near West Helena and played the organ in a local church. By 1918 he had taught himself the art of blues piano and, three years later, left home to work as an itinerant pianist in gambling establishments and barrelhouses throughout Louisiana and Mississippi. He led the life of a rambler, playing music in order to survive.



Roosevelt Sykes, 1930

While in St. Louis, Sykes performed as a soloist and occasionally played with other musicians like guitarist Big Joe Williams. However, his most important mentor was “Pork Chop” Lee Green, who taught Sykes a rendition of the “Forty-Four Blues” piano style.



Helena Downtown, 1930

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In 1929 Sykes met Jesse Johnson, the owner of the Deluxe Record Shop in St. Louis. Sykes, who at the time performed at an East St. Louis club for one dollar a night, quickly accepted Johnson's invitation to a recording session in New York. Accompanied by Johnson, Sykes arrived at the Okeh Studios in New York in June of 1929. He recorded several numbers, including a version of "Forty- Four Blues" which featured vocals based on the theme of a .44 pistol. During the same year, while attending a recording session for Paramount, Sykes received the nickname "The Honey Dripper" from a song written by singer Edith Johnson.



Edith Johnson

In the early 1930s, Sykes moved to Chicago. During the depression years, he recorded for several labels under various pseudonyms. Sykes settled in Chicago in 1941 and, within a short time, became a house musician for the Victor/Bluebird label. Though the label marketed him to be the successor for Fats Waller (who recorded on the same label and died in 1943), Sykes found success as the creator of his own style and remained active as a session man, recording with such musicians as Robert Brown a. k. a. Washboard Sam.



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Helena High School, 1929

In 1943, while in Chicago, Sykes formed his own group, the Honeydrippers, which often numbered twelve musicians, and within its ranks many of the city's finest horn players. Traveling with his group, Sykes played venues like the Palace Theater in Memphis. In performing with a larger ensemble, Sykes worked to conform his loose solo-oriented piano style to formal chord sequences. He recalled, in *Beale Black & Blue*, how he *"took up harmony, by having me a band. I had to tell the fellows what I wanted them to do.... But I didn't play what I told them, see, 'cause I never could play anything over again just alike."*



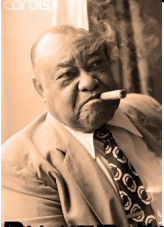
Roosevelt Sykes

In the post World War II years, Sykes recorded on several labels. In the liner notes to *Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival 1973*, John Sinclair noted: *"The music of Roosevelt Sykes, so timelessly buoyant, so fresh and personal at times, transcended every vagary of the marketplace and lived a vibrant life of its own, no matter what current fads of stylistic alterations held sway, all through the turbulent years between 1929 and 1949."*

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