.44 Blues

Little Brother Montgomery and Roosevelt Sykes rank among the greatest blues pianists of the 20th century and had unusually long and prolific careers. Both men were born in 1906, passed away in the early 1980's and began their careers within a year of each other; Sykes made his debut in 1929 while Montgomery made his in 1930. Both men also chose to record their versions of “44 blues” at their debut sessions,; Sykes cutting it first in 1929 as "Forty- Four Blues" and following year by Montgomery as “Vicksburg Blues.”

.44 Blues

Roosevelt Sykes was born on January 31, 1906 in Elmar, Arkansas although he was raised in St. Louis. He learned to play the organ in church. This allowed him to move over to the piano. He soon began to work in barrelhouses and jukes in Helena, Arkansas often working with pianist Lee Green. He kept St. Louis as his base of operation, but frequently traveled to Memphis and Chicago in the late 20's. His version of "Forty-Four Blues" was released on the Okeh Record label (1929). This helped to establish his reputation as one of the best blues pianists.



Roosevelt Sykes

The origins of **„44 Blues”** have been traced back to early 1920s Louisiana. Its earlier form was sometimes referred to, was a piano-driven *"barrelhouse honky-tonk blues"* that was performed as an instrumental. Little Brother Montgomery taught it to another blues pianist along the way by the name of Lee Green; Green, in turn, taught it to Roosevelt Sykes. As Sykes explained: *"He was the first guy I ever heard play the ’44 Blues.’ Several people had been playing it through the country of course — Little Brother Montgomery and several others, but nobody had ever recorded it and there was no words to it, no words or lyrics at all. So Lee Green, he took a lot of time out to teach me how to play it."*

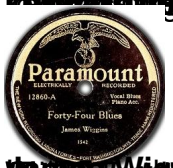


Roosevelt Sykes - .44 Blues

It was not until after Sykes recorded "44 Blues" that Green and Montgomery recorded their versions of "The Forty-Fours." While instrumentally both were similar to Sykes' version, the subject matter and lyrics were different. Lee Green recorded his version, titled "Number Forty-Four Blues" , two months after Sykes. About one year later, Little Brother Montgomery recorded his version titled "Vicksburg Blues". Of the three, Roosevelt Sykes' version was the most popular and *"was to be far more influential than Green's version." "[Sykes' lyrics] played on the differing interpretations of the phrase 'forty-fours' — the train number 44, the .44 caliber revolver and the 'little cabin' on which was the number 44, presumably a prison cell." "Undoubtedly, these overlays of meaning generally appealed to other singers, accounting for the frequent use of Sykes' lyrics."*


Vocalion




Paramount
Forty-Four Blues




CHESS
"FORTY FOUR"
THE HOWLIN' WOLF


Blues
MEMPHIS SLIM
44 Blues






Paramount
Vicksburg Blues
Little Brother Montgomery

