

Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues

By Roger Wood, Photography by James Fraher, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

Mention Houston, Texas, and most people conjure images of a modern, metropolitan city of endless concrete freeways connecting the huge skyscrapers of downtown with suburban neighborhoods and shopping malls. Houston is big oil and gas corporations, high finance, world-class museums and art galleries, renowned medical centers and universities, the Astrodome, and NASA. Most people, including many who live there, do not know that Houston is also the birthplace for some of the most important developments in modern blues, a place where “African American musicians created some of the most influential blues-based music ever played.” Houston is a city where, on any given night, the “tradition of blues performance as an African American community event” can still be found in many locales, particularly “in the near-southeast area known as Third Ward, as well as in the near-northeast location called Fifth Ward.”

Roger Wood and James Fraher take readers on a tour of Houston’s blues scene from the present back to the years just after World War II by focusing on the people and places that created the vibrant music culture and heritage of the “Bayou City.” At a time when some musicologists argue that “blacks don’t make blues music for black audiences anymore,” Wood and Fraher aim to prove that Houston

is an exception.

Wood and Fraher began their collaboration on this book in 1995, but Wood’s research into the city’s blues history dates back to the early 1980s, when he moved to Houston and began teaching English at Central College, the main campus of Houston Community College. With only some passing knowledge about blues musicians, Wood read an article in the *Houston Chronicle* on February 1, 1982, which announced the death of Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins and the local memorial service at a church. To Wood’s surprise, the church hosting Hopkins’s memorial service was located only a mile from Central College. One sentence about Hopkins’s career as a world renowned blues musician caught Wood’s attention: “Yet, he remained Houston’s own.” How could that be? How could this huge, cold, postmodern city of Houston be home to “the earthy poetry and acoustic guitar of Lightnin’ Hopkins?” The pursuit of answers to those and other questions about Houston’s blues history would shape Wood’s life for the next twenty years and lead ultimately to this book.

Down in Houston is organized into seven chapters, which give an account of the lives of the most creative and historically significant blues musicians of Houston. Weaving

together over 150 hours of tape-recorded oral histories with other types of fieldwork and research, Wood includes information about big stars, such as Lightnin’ Hopkins, T-Bone Walker, and Clifton Chenier, as well as lesser-known artists, songwriters, record producers, club owners, and side-men.

Fraher’s wonderful photographs of the people and places described in the chapters add visual documentation to the stories and emphasize participation of Houston’s black communities at the various music venues, located mainly in the Third and Fifth Wards. Although the book is not footnoted, Wood provides readers with ample resource information. Included are three appendices, which furnish a catalogue of interviews, an annotated discography of Houston blues CDs, and a Bayou City Blues map and legend locating twenty-six of the music venues and other historic places discussed in the book, as well as an extensive bibliography and index.

Read *Down in Houston*, and you will agree with what Texas singer-songwriter and former Houston resident, Townes Van Zandt, once said. “If you can’t catch the blues in Houston, man, you can’t catch them anywhere.”

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