

Roosevelt Sykes - biography

Also known as: The Blues Man, Dobby Brag, The Honeydripper, Easy Papa Johnson

“ Roosevelt Sykes is one of the most important urban bluesmen of all time.”

- Bob Koester, Delmark Album DL – 607

“ [In the 40s]he recorded important transitional records that bridged the gap between Southern rural blues and the modern, electric Chicago blues style.”

– Don Heckman, BMI: The Many Worlds of Music” 1969, p.26

Roosevelt Sykes was born on 31 January 1906, Elmar, Arkansas, USA and died on 17 July 1983, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. His father was a musician and all his brothers (Johny, Willie, Walter) Sykes learned piano (self-taught) at the age of 12 and frequently played the organ in the local church. Ran away from home in order to work. By the early 20s was playing in local barrelhouses. He moved to St. Louis in 1928, worked in Jazzland Club, and his first recordings for OKeh Records and Victor Records were made from 1929-31. During the 30s, Sykes recorded for Decca Records and acted as a talent scout for the label. Among his most popular compositions were "Night Time Is The Right Time" and "The Honeydripper", which was Sykes' nickname, because he was a known ladies-man. At that time he also played in local clubs in Memphis and later in such in Chicago. In the late 1930s teamed with St. Louis Jimmy to tour one-nighters across the U.S.. He settled in Chicago in the early 40s, becoming the piano accompanist on numerous city blues records by artists such as Lonnie Johnson. From 1943 he formed his own Honeydrippers group to tour one-nighters throughout the southern states. Then, worked with Memphis Minnie and during 1947-48 recorded with Jump Jackson Band, Speciality label, Chicago. During 1947-49 he appeared in his own The Toast of the Coast Show. In the early 50s began working in clubs in St. Louis and Chicago. In 1954, he moved to New Orleans and continued to record prolifically for Decca, Spivey, Prestige Records, Folkways Records, Delmark Records and other labels. The Prestige album Honeydripper featured King Curtis on saxophone. His versatility in different piano styles meant that Sykes was well placed to take advantage of the increased European interest in blues and he made his first visit to the UK in 1961, performing with Chris Barber's jazz band. He also appeared in the Belgaum movie: Roosevelt Sykes “ The Honeydripper”. During the early 60s recorded mainly in Chicago and NYC. He returned to Europe in 1965 and 1966 with the Folk Blues Festival package (made some records with Storeyville label) and played many US blues and jazz festivals in the 70s: Chicago Folk Festival, Miami Blues Festival, Mariposa Folk Festival, etc.. In 1972 he was shown in the French film, “Blues Under the Skin, Out of the Black into the Blues. In 1976 appeared in “The Devil’s Music – A History of the Blues”, BBC-1-TV, England. As a result of his

popularity with new audiences (Europe), much of his pre-1945 work was reissued in the 70s and 80s.

Influenced by: “Red Eye” Jessie Bell, “Pork Chop” Lee Green

Influence upon: Detroit Jr., Fats Domino, Pinetop Perkins, Smiley Lewis, etc.

Instruments: guitar, organ, piano.

Songs: “Ice Cream Freezer”, “A Woman Is A Demand”, “Ace Boogie”, “All Days Are Good Days”, “Big Time Woman”, “Coming Home”, “Hangover”, etc.

“St. James Infirmary” – lyrics

Performer: Roosevelt Sykes

Composer: Roosevelt Sykes

1. Down about ol’ Joe’s bardroom,
On the corner of the square,
Knot drinks were served as usual,
And a nice little crowd were there.
2. On my lef’ stood Little Joe Mc Kinney,
His eyeth were blood-shot’n’n’red
He saiz, “I’ve got a story to tell you”,
And these were the words he sai’.
3. I just past by Sain James Ifi(r)mary,
Saw my baby there,
Stretched on a long hwhite table,
So sweet, but so cold, so bad.
4. He sai’n “I want sixteen cold-blood horses,
Hitch to a rubber-tired hai’
Carryin’ seven sweet girls to the grave-yard,
But’z only six of them comi’ ba(d). (they gonna leave one out the(r)
5. He sai’n:”Let’a(r) go, let’a(r), God bless her,
Hwhen the’er soul may be,
Say, she’s gotta s’a(r)ch this whole wo’ld over,
She wouldn’a’found a truer lover than me.
6. He say’n’I’ll make it knocked out az I’m fyin’ over the sea,
Brolt down by some inny man cannon-ball,
He said:”But I want’o sai’to you brotherings,
My main’ on my lover was a cauz of it all.
7. He saith: “n now if I die, I want you to dress me,
Black-spoke coat an’a Stetson hat,
Put a tweni-dolla gol’ piece on my dog taik,
So my pals ‘unnow I died standin’ pet. (aces back to back, man)
8. Howdi-hiwdi-hai,
Hitti-hitti-hi,

Howdi-how-di-hoo.

Unlike the typical blues, in “St James Infirmary”, Roosevelt Sykes writes different lines for all verses- the first vocal phrase does not repeat the second. The lyrics of “St. James infirmary” address the usual for blues love theme and the separation between two lovers. A lot of symbolism is used throughout the piece and also certain brand objects that mean a lot for the typical African-American: the Stetson hat, the coat (I cannot clearly hear the brand but it must be popular). Death and deliverance of this hard miserable life that the Negroes lived are also strong images in the piece. Sykes swings some of the words in such a hearty way and sings like it is his soul that is tormented by the loss of the lover, like it’s his love that was “stretched on a long white table”.

:00 Four bar piano introduction

:15 Beginning of the central theme together with the singing of Sykes; after the first and in all next lines, there are fill-ins, made by Sykes on piano.

:47 End of first verse followed by a fill-in

:49 The second chorus begins with the same structure as the first one

1:19 Third chorus starts, same structure, the mood of the singing becomes more intense

1:51 The fourth chorus – the same pattern, more and more shouts as the narrator approaches his demise; the last line has a lyrical fill-in

2:23 The fifth chorus – the same pattern, accents on the different words, some are sung more gently, mainly in the latter part of the chorus.

2:50 The sixth chorus follows the already taken pattern even the shouts in the first part of the chorus and the quieting in the latter one line is like in the fifth chorus

3:18 The same pattern, but with more and more intense singing approaching the final verse; like in the fourth chorus, there is a lyrical fill-in

3:48 The final chorus stars; both the piano and the vocals’ playing escalates; unlike all other verses, here there are only three lines; the text here is not of words but some melodic sounds (almost the same), repeated in various ways, which makes them sound different (the same tones of the piano, running simultaneously with it)

4:05 The outro of the piece starts, resembling the intro

4:20 End