

# Dr. Ross and Roosevelt Sykes play to Hovel audiences

## One man band collicks and pianist thumps barrelhouse

by Keith Layton

The Edmonton Jazz Society presented a night of very fine blues artists Wednesday night. A nearly full house travelled back in time with the music of Dr. Ross the Harmonica Boss and show headliner Roosevelt Sykes.

For Dr. Ross, the warm-up of the evening, it was his first performance in Edmonton. Like most blues performers he has a colorful and intriguing background. Born Oct 21 1925 in Delta, Miss. he picked up harp at the age of six. The doctor's mother and the radio were his major sources of instruction. The doctor cited John Lee *Sonny Boy* Williamson as his major influence in the early years.

Probably Dr. Ross' most compelling aspect isn't anything that is revealed in behind-closed-door interviews but is the thing he does on stage. Dr. Ross is one of the all-too-rare exponents of the one-man band genre, a delightful quirk of the American musical heritage. Playing harmonica, guitar, top hat and bass drum all at once is no mean feat. To master the art of playing four instruments at once within the rhythmically complex idiom of Mississippi country blues is even more impressive - and the doctor never missed a beat.

His mastery of the idiom did not end with his rhythmic conception. His use of harmonic tension and dissonance, so important to blues was equally impressive. He would lay down a heavy rhythm at times rollicking times dragging with his top hat and bass drum and subtly layering in guitar harp and vocals. Playing with the rhythm and harmonic structure the audience travelled back with Dr. Ross to the late 40s the period of the blues most overwhelming creativity.

Dr. Ross did not plunge into a one-man band act, however. The crowd was initially presented with his mastery of the harmonica in several acceptella harp/vocal numbers reminiscent of the works of Rice *Sonny Boy* Williamson Miller; and on guitar, a reworked version of JB Lenoir's *How Long?* which for me surpassed the original.

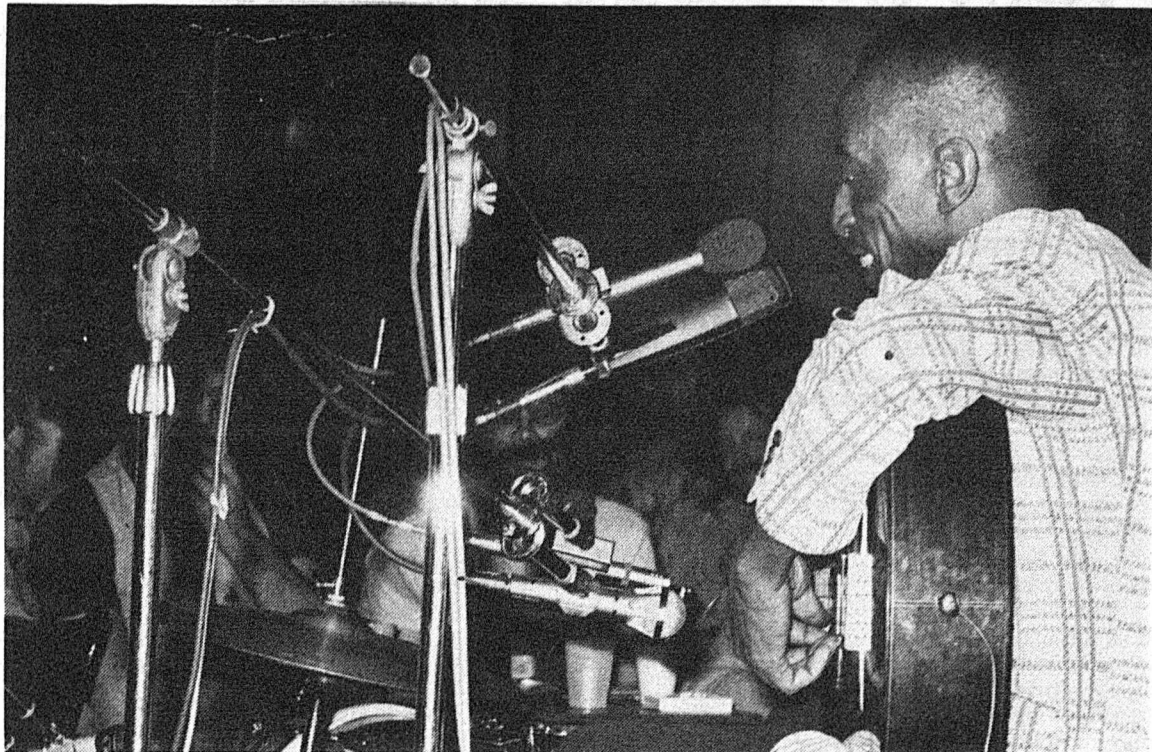
Following Dr. Ross is not an easy thing to do but Roosevelt Sykes' creative genius came very close to equalling the task. A not quite up to par Roosevelt Sykes is one of the best blues artists in the world. Sykes has been retired for three years and plays only occasional gigs now, preferring to live out his years at home in New Orleans sitting "in a rocking chair" and "goin' on 'em".

Those who remembered his performance last year at SUB Theatre were not presented with the same performance. Sykes played several old jazz standards such as *Starlost* and *Honeyuckle Rose* before moving into his particular brand of blues. This form is more or less a synthesis of *skum Blues* loaded with sexual metaphor and classic barrelhouse piano. *Ice Cream* was his hit of the late 1920s and is the most well-known exam-

Sykes vocals contrasted his smooth piano work beautifully. His loose approach lessened the contrast. Though looseness

in his playing manifested itself not in the kind of designed dissonance of Dr. Ross but more the kind revealed in wrong notes. Rhythmically though, Sykes was brilliant. He strode through *Sweet Home Chicago* cramming complex runs into the form with slight time lags before sliding off into runs closely following his classic walking bass lines.

Roosevelt Sykes and Dr. Ross are important links in music history. Even if they weren't each brilliant players and performers we would have been privileged to have had the opportunity to see them.



Top Dr. Ross, one man band thumping out the Mississippi country blues on four instruments without missing a beat.  
Above Roosevelt Sykes combining classic barrelhouse piano with sexual metaphor. It takes a lot of amplification to carry Dr. Ross' entire act.  
Down: Roosevelt Sykes.  
Below: Dr. Ross.  
All photos by Don Truckey.

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