



Roosevelt Sykes was born on January 31, 1906, in Elmar, Arkansas. Around the age of ten, he played the church organ which he taught himself. In 1921, he left home at the age of 15 to play barrelhouses style of blues in West Helena. In the late 1920's he moved to St. Louisiana and began recording in 1929 for Okeh. He was signed to four different labels the next year under four different names. He quickly began recording for multiple labels under various names including "Easy Pap Johnson", "Dobby Bragg" and "Willie Kelly". He also recorded for Bluebird label in Chicago and recorded with The Honeydrippers. His first release was "44'Blues" which became a blues standard and his trademark.

In Chicago, Sykes began to display an increasing urbanity in his lyric-writing, using an eight-bar blues pop gospel structure instead of the traditional twelve-bar blues. However, despite the growing urbanity of his outlook, he gradually became less competitive in the post-World War II music scene.

Roosevelt left Chicago in 1954 for New Orleans as electric blues was taking over the Chicago Blues clubs. When he returned to recording in the 1960's it was for labels such as Delmark, Bluesville, Storyville, and Folkways that were documenting the quickly passing blues history. In 1965 and 1966, he toured with the American Folk Blues Festival. While in Europe in 1966, Sykes cut the album, *Gold Mine: Live in Europe* for Delmark.

Sykes moved to New Orleans in the late 1960's and often played at the Court of the Two Sisters. He appeared as the opening act for the first annual Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969, playing before an audience of cheering young admirers. Roosevelt Sykes was a man who possessed incredible musical talent, as well as the ability to communicate with people from all walks of life. Sykes cited the real inspiration behind his musical talent in Beale Black & Blue, "Blues is the talent you're born with from God. He gave me the gift. I didn't even take a lesson in my life." He lived out his final years in New Orleans, where he died on July 7, 1983.

Precious few pianists could boast the thundering boogie prowess of Roosevelt Sykes, and even fewer could chase away the blues with his blues as the rotund cigar-chomping 88s ace did. He was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1999 and the Gennett Records Walk of Fame in 2011.