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Chicago Blues

In the United States during the 1950s, Chicago was arguably the best place in the world to listen to blues music. Some of blues' best artists ever like Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Buddy Guy found themselves playing in Chicago clubs. But why Chicago instead of somewhere in the south where blues was born? There are a variety of cultural and societal factors that led to Chicago becoming the world headquarters for the blues. Chicago blues was created on the streets as blacks moved north during the Great Migration, became a mainstream success soon after, and was the place where blues laid the foundation for Rock n' Roll.

In this paper, I will begin by describing the pre-blues musical history of Chicago, to show why it made a good destination for musicians from the Mississippi Delta. Then I will briefly describe the Mississippi Delta blues traditions and why some of its best artists left to come to Chicago. Then I will describe how the blues scene in Chicago started and then flourished. Next, I will go into detail about a few of the record companies that were vital to the popularization of Chicago blues. Afterwards, I will describe some of the artists that propagated Chicago blues. To finish off, I will describe the legacy Chicago blues left, as well as its influence on Rock n' Roll.

Jazz musicians that moved north to Chicago paved the way for the blues musicians to come later. Even before Jazz was popularized, ragtime pianists, important precursors of jazz, gravitated to the World's Columbian Exposition in

1893, where they set in motion a grand procession of twentieth-century popular-music styles associated with Chicago. Whereas New York's Tin Pan Alley dominated the music publishing business, Chicago tended to attract performers rather than professional songwriters, and these musicians tended to excel at nightclub work, and the Great Migration increased this number of entertainers. Starting in 1910, the Great Migration was the movement of 6 million blacks out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West (UChicago). Blacks moved from 14 states of the South, especially Mississippi and Louisiana, to metropolitan areas of the United States, including Chicago. Chicago's magnetism proved especially powerful for musicians from New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta. Bountiful club work and, beginning in 1923, the possibility of making records, which did not exist in the South, proved irresistible (UChicago).

Southern musicians moved north after 1917, bringing with them the New Orleans "Dixieland" or sometimes called "hot jazz" styles; this led to the distinct "Chicago style" of Jazz (UChicago). Some of the stars of this jazz scene were King Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton. Louis Armstrong's recordings with his Chicago-based Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five and Hot Seven band came out in the years 1925 to 1928. These recordings marked the transition of original New Orleans jazz to a more sophisticated type of American improvised music with more emphasis on solo choruses instead of just little solo breaks, showing that Chicago had developed its own style of Jazz (Owsley). This style of playing was adopted by white musicians who favored meters of 2 instead of 4. Emphasis on solos, faster tempos, string bass and guitar (replacing the traditional tuba and banjo) also distinguish Chicago-style

playing from Dixieland (Owsley). The gangsters of Chicago engaged profiled musicians like Earl Hines, whose benefit was to lead an orchestra in one of the city's top locations (UChicago). Most of the more ambitious members of the Roaring Twenties jazz scene in Chicago left for New York City late in the decade, including the future King of Swing, Benny Goodman (Goodman). Due to lack of funds, smaller record companies had to shut up shop in the Great Depression. This led to the media and the music business becoming increasingly centralized into national organizations run from New York (Goodman).

The Delta blues was one of the earliest styles of blues music. Delta blues is regarded as a regional variant of country blues. Guitar and harmonica are its dominant instruments; slide guitar (usually on the steel guitar) is a hallmark of the style. Vocal styles in Delta blues range from introspective and soulful to passionate and fiery. Although Delta blues certainly existed in some form or another at the turn of the 20th century, it was first recorded in the late 1920s, when record companies realized the potential African American market in "race records" (Palmer). The major labels produced the earliest recordings, consisting mostly of one person singing and playing an instrument, with artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton and Robert Johnson achieving success. The defining characteristic of Delta blues is instrumentation and an emphasis on rhythm and "bottleneck" slide; the basic harmonic structure is not substantially different from that of blues performed elsewhere (Palmer). The Mississippi delta was known for two things other than its blues music: fertile soil and poverty. It is no surprise then that some of the best

blues artists wanted to find a new way of life in a different part of the country along with millions of other African Americans.

Chicago's allure of clubs that would have black musicians, "black allure" DJs, and record companies that were willing to take chances on this relatively new style of music were the main factors in why Chicago blues took off. Chicago blues started in (as you may have guessed) Chicago, as music created by part-time musicians playing as street musicians, at rent parties, and other events in the black community. One of the most important early incubators for Chicago blues was the open air-market on Maxwell Street, one of the largest open-air markets in the nation (Rowe). Residents of the black community would frequent it to buy and sell just about anything. It was a natural location for blues musicians to perform. The standard path for blues musicians was to start out as street musicians and at house parties and eventually make their way to blues clubs. The first blues clubs in Chicago were mostly in predominantly black neighborhoods on the South Side, with a few in the smaller black neighborhoods on the West Side (Rowe). One of the most famous was Ruby Lee Gatewood's Tavern, known by patrons as "The Gates". Other legendary clubs such as Silvio's, the Flame Club, and the 708 opened along Indiana Avenue on the South Side and Lake Street on the West Side, serving as community centers for migrants arriving in ever-greater numbers during the 1940s (Rowe). Another reason blues took off was that black DJs ensured that Chicago blues would get airtime. A key catalyst to the blues' postwar popularization were "black-appeal" disc jockeys, such as Al Benson and Big Bill Hill, who ensured that records released by Chess, Vee-Jay, and other labels received public exposure (Rowe).

Chicago's independent record companies that understood the unlimited potential of Chicago blues music helped to spread its popularity nationally and internationally. Some of the most important labels, operating out of "Record Row" (Cottage Grove between 47th and 50th), included Chicago's Miracle (founded 1946), Chess (founded as Aristocrat in 1947), Chance (1950), United (1952), and Vee-Jay (1953), (Rowe). Leonard Chess bought a stake in a record company called Aristocrat Records in 1947; in 1950, Leonard brought his brother, Phil into the operation and they became sole owners of the company, renaming it as Chess Records (Collis). In 1951, the Chess brothers began an association with Sam Phillips' Memphis Recording Service. One of the most important recordings that Phillips gave to Chess was "Rocket 88" by Jackie Brenston/Ike Turner and his Delta Cats, which topped Billboard magazine's R&B Records chart (Collis). The importance of the record did not go unnoticed as it was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1998 because of its influence as a rock and roll single (Collis). One of the most important artists that came out of Memphis was Howlin' Wolf, who stayed with the label until his death in 1976. Chess records had some of the biggest names in blues on their list including Bo Diddley, Willie Dixon, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy and others.

Another independent Chicago record company that had success, albeit short lived, was Cobra Records. Cobra Records was started on Chicago's West Side in 1956 by Eli Toscano (Snowden). Toscano approached Willie Dixon about working for Cobra. Dissatisfied with his arrangement with Chess Records, Dixon joined Cobra. There he served in many capacities, including talent scout, producer,

arranger, songwriter, bassist and became "the artistic vision behind Cobra Records." (Snowden). The label was important for launching the recording careers of Chicago blues artists Otis Rush, Magic Sam and Buddy Guy and "signaled the arrival of a new generation of [blues] artists and a new sound ... to be called the West Side Sound." (Snowden). The success of the company was brief, as the company ran into financial troubles and went out of business only 3 years after its inception. Eli Toscano died in 1967 and Willie Dixon returned to Chess and entered one of the most prolific periods of his career.

Muddy Waters was one of the most influential artists of the time period, eventually becoming known as the "father of modern Chicago blues". Born as McKinley Morganfield, Waters grew up on Stovall Plantation near Clarksdale, Mississippi, and by age seventeen was playing the guitar at parties, emulating local blues artists Son House and Robert Johnson (Roots). In 1943, he moved to Chicago with the hope of becoming a full-time professional musician, eventually recording, in 1946, first for Columbia Records and then for Aristocrat Records, later renamed Chess Records as mentioned above (Roots). At first Chess wanted him to record with the house band, but eventually relented, and by September 1953 he was recording with one of the most acclaimed blues groups in history: Little Walter Jacobs on harmonica, Jimmy Rogers on guitar, Elga Edmonds (also known as Elgin Evans) on drums and Otis Spann on piano. The band recorded a series of blues classics during the early 1950s, some with the help of bassist and songwriter Willie Dixon, including "Hoochie Coochie Man" (number 8 on the R&B charts), "I Just Want to Make Love to You" (number 4), and "I'm Ready" (Roots). They gave him a

succession of showstoppers and an image, which were important for a bluesman trying to break out of the grind of local gigs into national prominence. Muddy reigned over the early 1950s Chicago blues scene, his band becoming a proving ground for some of the city's best blues talent. That being said, he did have to share the spotlight. Muddy developed a long-running, generally good-natured rivalry with Howlin' Wolf.

Howlin' Wolf was one of the best known and most prominent Chicago blues figures. Born June 10, 1910, Chester Arthur Burnett had a rough time growing up, being thrown out of the house by his mother and being mistreated by his uncle (Wolf). Burnett eventually moved in with his father, and after some growing up was 6 feet 3 inches tall and often weighed close to 275 pounds. He explained the origin of the name Howlin' Wolf: "I got that from my grandfather", who would tell him stories about wolves in that part of the country and warn him that if he misbehaved the "howling wolves would get him" (Wolf). Eventually, Wolf met blues legend Charley Patton, who taught him not only how to play the guitar, but guitar tricks that were part of Wolf's showmanship his entire career (Wolf). In 1951, Sam Phillips recorded several songs by Howlin' Wolf at his Memphis Recording Service. Later, Leonard Chess was able to secure his contract, and Howlin' Wolf relocated to Chicago in 1952. In the 1950s, Howlin' Wolf had five songs on the Billboard national R&B charts: "Moanin' at Midnight", "How Many More Years", "Who Will Be Next", "Smokestack Lightning", and "I Asked for Water (She Gave Me Gasoline)" (Wolf). One of the musicians that played with Wolf had quite the successful career himself, and his name was Buddy Guy.

Buddy Guy was one of the most influential guitarists of the Chicago blues era who did not achieve commercial success until later in his career. Guy was born and raised in Lettsworth, Louisiana. He began learning to play the guitar using a two-string diddley bow he made (Biography.com). Buddy Guy took a train out to Chicago on September 25, 1957, a date so special to Guy that it has since been engraved on all of his guitars, to make a better living for himself (Biography.com). Soon afterwards, Guy fell under the influence of Muddy Waters. In 1958, a competition with West Side guitarists Magic Sam and Otis Rush gave Guy a record contract, where he recorded for Cobra Records (Biography.com). Chess, Buddy's record label from 1959 to 1968, refused to record Guy playing in the novel style of his live shows. Chess used Guy mainly as a session guitarist to back Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Koko Taylor and others (Biography.com). Guy's career took off during the blues revival of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Bo Diddley was another influential guitarist that shaped rock n' roll as we know it. Born in McComb, Mississippi, as Ellas Otha Bates, he was adopted and raised by his mother's cousin, Gussie McDaniel, whose surname he assumed (Telegraph). In 1934, the McDaniel family moved to the largely black South Side of Chicago, where the young Ellas dropped the name Otha and became Ellas McDaniel. Despite being in a church orchestra as a violinist, he was more taken by the pulsating, rhythmic music he heard at a local Pentecostal church and became interested in the guitar. After playing on street corners for a number of years, in 1951 he landed a regular spot at the 708 Club, on Chicago's South Side, with a

repertoire influenced by Louis Jordan, John Lee Hooker, and Muddy Waters (Telegraph). Just like the other important blues artists of Chicago, Bo also recorded at Chess records, where in March 1955, the A-side, "Bo Diddley", became a number one R&B hit (Telegraph). The origin of the stage name Bo Diddley is unclear. McDaniel claimed that his peers gave him the name, which he suspected was an insult, but he also said that the name first belonged to a singer his adoptive mother knew (Telegraph).

Chicago blues was not merely a good genre of music in itself, but also laid the groundwork for Rock n' Roll. Chicago is one of the places where the faster, juicier boogie-woogie emerged from the blues. Chicago blues used a variety of instruments in a way which heavily influenced early rock and roll music, including instruments like electrically amplified guitar, drums, piano, bass guitar and sometimes the saxophone or harmonica. Electric guitar was used out of necessity in loud clubs, but the sound it created was so infectious that it became a staple of Chicago blues and Rock after that. Some of the core riffs created by Bo Diddley, Willie Dixon, Chuck Berry, Howlin Wolf, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy and others were the basis of a wide amount of Rock n' Roll (Dahl). Many songs created by Chess artists were later reproduced by many famous Rock n' Roll bands and artists such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys and Eric Clapton (Dahl).

Not only did these famous rockers cover songs from Chess records, but also their music was also heavily influenced by the Chess artists. For example, Bo Diddley was nicknamed The Originator, because of his key role in the transition from the blues to rock and roll, and influenced a host of artists, including Elvis

Presley, Buddy Holly, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, Eric Clapton, the Who, Jimi Hendrix and Parliament-Funkadelic (Dahl). Some of the most famous bands and artists ever attribute their success to Chicago bluesmen. Stevie Ray Vaughan, objectively one of the best blues guitarists ever, stated that, "Without Buddy Guy, there would be no Stevie Ray Vaughan. Without Buddy Guy, the blues, not to mention rock as we know it, might be a heckuva lot less interesting today. Take the blues out of contemporary rock music—or pop, jazz and funk for that matter—and what you have left is a wholly spineless affair. A tasteless stew. Makes you shudder to think about it ..." (Milkowski). Guy's guitar playing is loud and aggressive, uses pioneering distortion and feedback techniques, employs long solos, has shifts in volume and texture, and is driven by emotion and impulse. These characteristics were eagerly learned and applied by the new wave of 1960s British artists and later became basic attributes of blues-rock music and its offspring, hard rock and heavy metal music. Muddy Waters also did his fair share to influence Rock n' Roll (Milkowski). He helped Chuck Berry, a pioneer of Rock, get his first recording contract. More importantly though, Waters' use of amplification is cited as "the technological missing link between Delta Blues and Rock 'N' Roll." (Roots). In addition to this, one of the most popular bands of all time, The Rolling Stones, named themselves after a Muddy Waters song.

The importance of Chicago blues on popular music cannot be understated. Originally started on the streets by former delta bluesmen, Chicago clubs quickly picked up on the hot new trend. Record labels like Chess and Cobra brought Chicago blues to the forefront of American media. Not only was Chicago blues

popular in its own right, but also it set the foundation for Rock n' Roll both in America and abroad. It was only a matter of time before its influence reached across the Atlantic, inspiring some of the most well known bands ever like the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and Led Zeppelin. Just as Stevie Ray Vaughan said with Buddy Guy, music would be a lot more boring had Chicago blues never come around. We can all consider ourselves lucky that it did.

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