URBAN BLUES

In the years after World War I, southern blacks began a mass exodus northward in search of better jobs and a better life. The move from the cotton fields to the factories continued through the Depression and World War II years, and was reflected in a shift from acoustic rural blues played in tiny "juke joints" to amplified urban blues, played on electric guitars with a band backing and a strong beat to fill the noisy city clubs and dance floors.

The electric guitar was introduced on jazz and blues records in the late 1930's. Charlie Christian and Eddie Durham pioneered the horn-like single-string jazz style that elevated the guitar from its traditional supporting role in the rhythm section of jazz bands. **Aaron "T-Bone" Walker** spent his early years leading Blind Lemon Jefferson around Texas towns, then played in several jazz bands before recording under his own name in 1942. Walker, who had his signature hit with 1947's "Stormy Monday," was the first to really exploit the new possibilities offered by electricity—the variety and control of tone colors, volume, sustain, special effects etc.—and was largely responsible for developing the classy, jazz-tinged "uptown" urban blues that was most accessible to later blues and rock players.

Memphis

Memphis was a natural hub for blues musicians, just upriver and up Highway 61 from the Delta and home to **Beale Street**, an area thronged with blues clubs that offered steady employment to the many Delta bluesmen who settled in Memphis or spent time there en route to Chicago. Although now something of a glossed-over blues "theme park," Beale Street was once a thriving musical center at the confluence of rural and urban blues styles, and was witness to the exciting changes as the blues moved from the rural past into the urban present.

Memphis also had the advantage of a hometown recording studio that provided further opportunities for blues players. The tiny studio run by independent producer **Sam Phillips** in a converted radiator repair shop was the only place a black man could make a record in Memphis, and Phillips was personally responsible for preserving much of the city's rich musical heritage. After leasing his recordings to outside labels, Phillips launched his own Sun label in 1953 and, in another stunning bit of musical foresight, discovered Elvis Presley and put Memphis and Sun Records at the center of the rock & roll map.

B. B. King

B. B. King built on T-Bone Walker's jazz-laced, single-string style and added the urgency of the Delta to develop his own emotional blend of gospel-inflected crying vocals, virtuosic guitar solos and polished big band arrangements. Born Riley King in 1925, he moved from Indianola, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1949 and landed a disc jockey spot on WDIA, the first station in the nation to go to an all-black format. King took the name "Beale Street Blues Boy," which was then shortened to "B. B.," and embarked on the most successful of all blues careers in 1951 with "Three O'Clock Blues," a #1 R&B hit that was recorded in independent producer Sam Phillips' newly-opened Memphis studio and leased to the Los Angeles-based Modern Records.

King and his trusty guitar, "Lucille," have been the blues' ambassador to the mainstream without sacrificing his heritage or losing touch with his emotional roots, whether playing in a rowdy blueshall or a black tie nightclub. The amiable, constantly touring King was the most popular blues performer on the "hippie" circuit during the blues revival of the late sixties and early seventies, and even enjoyed a string of pop hits in the period, including 1969's "The Thrill Is Gone," a classic pleading blues in a lush modern soul setting. King's influence on later blues and rock guitarists, like Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, and Eric Clapton, was so pervasive that it is really inseparable from the influence of the blues itself.

Howlin' Wolf

Another Delta native, the peerless Howlin' Wolf (b. Chester Burnett, 1910; d. 1976), also began a daily radio broadcast in Memphis in 1949, though in every other way he represented the opposite end of the blues spectrum from the forward looking sophistication of B. B. King. Howlin' Wolf grew up on the Dockery Farms plantation near Cleveland, Mississippi, which was also home to Charley Patton and as good a candidate as any for the actual birthplace of the Delta blues. Wolf played with and learned from Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson and the other Delta giants, but was still splitting his time between farming and playing the blues when he decided to move to Memphis and begin a serious music career at the age of 39. Howlin' Wolf remained firmly rooted in pure Delta blues—no jazzy licks or uptown gloss for the Wolf—and used electricity to amplify and further strengthen the raw intensity of the Delta blues. The recordings he made at Sam Phillips' studio from 1950 through 1952, including "Moaning at Midnight" and "How Many More Years," rank as some of the most electrifying records ever made, driven by Willie Johnson's brutal, distorted guitar playing and Wolf's soul-piercing, microphone-shredding vocals and unearthly trademark howls. Sam Phillips recalls the intensity of a Howlin' Wolf session: "...the greatest show you could see to this day would be Chester Burnett doing one of those sessions in my studio. God, what it would be worth on film to see the fervor in that man's face when he sang. His eyes would light up, you'd see the veins come out on his neck, and, buddy, there was *nothing* on his mind but that song. He sang with his damn soul."[i]

Together, the contrasting styles of B. B. King and Howlin' Wolf present the musical extremes of urban blues styles and hint at the rich vitality of Memphis and Beale Street in the early fifties. A decade later, the Stax studio made Memphis the soul music capital of America, though the blues still made its presence felt in the form of **Albert King**, who recorded with the Stax house band, Booker T. and the MG's. King's soul-spiked blues was the most direct influence on Eric Clapton's late-sixties work with Cream, who covered his "Born Under a Bad Sign," and, via Clapton, on the guitar styles of an entire generation of blues-rockers.

John Lee Hooker

Most notable among the other cities that developed their own blues scenes were Houston, home to Albert Collins ("The Freeze"), Lightnin' Hopkins ("Short Haired Woman") and the Duke record label, where Bobby "Blue" Bland ("Farther Up the Road") and Junior Parker ("Next Time You See Me") recorded; St. Louis, home to Ike Turner,

Little Milton Campbell and pre-Stax Albert King; and Detroit, where Clarksdale, Mississippi native **John Lee Hooker** recorded "Boogie Chillun" in 1948, a classic one-chord rhythmic riff that has been endlessly copied and elaborated upon by Canned Heat, ZZ Top, the Rolling Stones and many others. Hooker's hypnotic rhythmic drones, half-spoken storylines and casual spontaneity formed one of the blues' most distinct individual styles. Other oft-covered originals include "Crawling King Snake Blues," recorded by the Doors, and "Boom Boom," a 1962 R&B hit that was covered by the Yardbirds (featuring Eric Clapton) at their first recording session. Hooker lived long enough to reap the accolades—in the form of covers, recorded tributes and a slew of jams and duets—of his rock descendants, and he remains the official Living Legend of the blues.

Sweet Home Chicago

Oh baby, don't you want to go
Oh baby, don't you want to go
Back to the land of California, to my sweet home Chicago

So sang Robert Johnson in 1936, and wherever it was, Chicago was definitely *out there* somewhere far enough from the dying farms and dreary life of the Delta to seem like a beacon of hope. By World War II, Chicago was home to a huge community of transplanted Delta residents, including many blues artists who were lured by the factory jobs and, later, by the hope of recording for **Chess Records**, the great urban blues label founded by Leonard and Phil Chess in the late forties.

Chicago's promise of jobs and opportunity had lured southern blacks and fueled the dreams of musicians ever since an influx from New Orleans turned Chicago into the jazz center of the early twenties. By the 1940's, Chicago was home to Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, Peetie Wheatstraw, Kokomo Arnold and many other southern bluesmen who were recording with small band backings and playing in a variety of popular styles ranging from straight blues to jazz, jump and novelty numbers meant to appeal to the changing tastes of an urban audience. In spite of the changes, however, black Chicago remained a very southern community: the sprawling South Side and social centers like the Maxwell Street market were filled with displaced, homesick southerners who still loved their blues hard and straight, Delta-style. Chicago inherited the Delta's blues heritage as a link to the past but used it to help shape the future, in the Chess Records releases by Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and the other greats who made Chicago synonymous with the bar band style of urban blues that fed—and still feeds—directly into rock & roll.

Muddy Waters

Muddy Waters (b. McKinley Morganfield, 1915; d. 1983) was first recorded in 1941 at his home on the Stovall Plantation near Clarksdale, Mississippi, by Library of Congress archivist Alan Lomax. His style was directly descended from Robert Johnson and classic Delta bottleneck blues, and it remained strongly rooted in the Delta even after his move to Chicago in 1943 and his switch to electric guitars. Muddy Waters' first hit, "I Can't Be Satisfied," an electrified update of one of his early Lomax recordings, was released in 1948 on the Aristocrat label, which was renamed Chess Records in 1949. Chess launched its long run as the premiere blues label with a series of Muddy Waters

hits in the early fifties—"Louisiana Blues," "Honey Bee," "She Moves Me," "Still a Fool"—that featured a full band backing and a fully-realized urban blues sound.

The toughened sound provided by electricity and amplifiers was further strengthened on Muddy's records by Leonard Chess' experiments with echo and reverb, intentionally over-driven microphones and the amplified harmonica that is as strong and menacing a presence as Muddy's singing and slide guitar. Waters and harmonica player Little Walter Jacobs were joined by guitarist Jimmy Rogers, pianist Otis Spann, bassist Willie Dixon and drummer Elgin Evans, all Delta refugees, in Chicago's first great blues band—probably the greatest blues band ever assembled. The dark, brooding, fiercely electric sound of Muddy Waters' music defined urban blues and astonished his fellow blues players and Chicago audiences. The music seemed startlingly new yet familiar, as if the ghost of Robert Johnson had reappeared in the guise of a thoroughly modern blues band. A decade later, Waters' records had an equally electrifying impact on a small but devoted band of blues devotees in England, who viewed coming even *close* to the sound of a Muddy Waters record as the ultimate accomplishment. (Muddy Waters liked the Rolling Stones' version of "I Just Want to Make Love to You" and declared them "my boys," to the great delight and relief of the group who had taken their name from one of his songs.)

Willie Dixon and Howlin' Wolf at Chess

Muddy Waters was the blues world's equivalent of a rock star, and his larger-than-life, "hoodoo stud" image was cemented by the sexual bravado and stop-time swagger of his biggest hits: "Hoochie Coochie Man," "I Just Want to Make Love to You" and "I'm Ready." All three songs were written for Waters in 1954 by Chess Records' resident bass player, A&R man, songwriter, arranger, producer and talent scout, **Willie Dixon**. Dixon (b. Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1915; d. 1992) was the author of the greatest modern blues, including a long string of hits for Muddy Waters, "My Babe" for Little Walter, "I Can't Quit You Baby" for Otis Rush, and most of the Chess hits for Howlin Wolf.[ii]

Howlin' Wolf moved to Chicago in 1953 and made music at the Chess studio that was even more ferocious than his Memphis recordings. The shivering dread of 1954's "Evil" and the hypnotic riff and eerie howls of his 1956 signature song, "Smokestack Lightnin'," staked his turf as Muddy Waters' only serious rival. Wolf hit full stride in the early sixties with his own "Killing Floor" and a slew of Willie Dixon numbers, including "Wang Dang Doodle," "Back Door Man," "Little Red Rooster" and "Spoonful," all covered to the point of being rock standards. (The piercing snarl of Howlin' Wolf's voice was copied as well, most obviously by Wolfman Jack, most creatively by Captain Beefheart.)

Jimmy Reed and Elmore James

Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters were the Twin Towers at Chess, though nearly all of the Chicago blues greats recorded for the label during its heyday. Two notable exceptions were Delta veterans Jimmy Reed, who recorded for Chicago's Vee Jay Records, and Elmore James, who recorded for a number of labels (including Chess). Reed was one the best-known bluesmen among white audiences, thanks largely to the

frequent covers of his songs. (Elvis Presley, for one, covered Reed's "Big Boss Man," "Ain't That Lovin' You Baby" and "Baby, What You Want Me to Do.") Elmore James' slash & burn slide guitar harkened back to the deepest blues of the Delta—back to the days when he traveled with Robert Johnson. James played the hardest rocking, most straightforward and accessible style of bar band blues, and had a huge influence—probably the biggest of all the blues players—on rock guitarists, who have habitually copied his style and covered "It Hurts Me Too," "Shake Your Money Maker" and his electrifying version of Robert Johnson's "Dust My Broom."

Hound Dog Taylor, Son Seals, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells and many other great singers and players have kept Chicago blues alive through changing times and tastes. Today's wide and largely white audience for the blues obscures the fact that, for all the brilliance of the music and musicians, the blues appealed to a relatively small audience of older black listeners during its explosive peak in the 1950's. Undiluted blues was completely foreign to most white listeners, young or old, through the fifties, and was considered old-fashioned by younger black listeners who preferred the dance beat and happier feel of *rhythm* & blues. Times got even tougher for the blues artists when rhythm & blues crossed over and turned into rock & roll, taking away more of their audience and venues. Ironically, Chess Records was home to two of the early shaping forces of rock & roll: Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley. This significant contribution has earned Chess praise for helping to "invent" rock & roll, though it had already done that long before Berry and Diddley arrived.

The Blues Had a Baby and They Named it 'Rock & Roll'

While initially viewed as a threat and a thankless imitation, rock music was eventually responsible for bringing the blues to a wider audience than it had ever enjoyed or dreamed of. Many of the surviving originals, like Son House, Sonny Boy Williamson and John Lee Hooker, were rediscovered during the late fifties and early sixties as the booming popularity of folk music sent young aficionados digging further into their musical roots. The mid-sixties British Invasion heightened interest in the men who had inspired so many rock guitar heroes and recorded the original versions of so many current hits. The Rolling Stones, for example, began as a blues covers band and sang the praises of their heroes to anyone who would listen—they performed Howlin' Wolf's "Little Red Rooster" on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and insisted that Howlin' Wolf himself be included as a guest when they appeared on the television show *Shindig*. Blues guitarists like B. B. King, Elmore James, Albert King and Albert Collins achieved even greater popularity in the late sixties when they were embraced by the psychedelic scene that, thanks to Hendrix and Clapton, had developed a new appreciation for the blues and for virtuoso guitar playing.

Elvis Presley began his career singing a blues song in Sam Phillip's Memphis studio, and the thin line separating the blues and rock has been blurred ever since. The blues formed the foundation for the guitar rock of the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, Cream, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, Jimi Hendrix, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Canned Heat, Led Zeppelin, ZZ Top, Johnny Winter, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and so on

down an endless list, and it remains a source of rejuvenating energy and inspiration. Always adaptable yet timeless and unchanging, the blues is rock's soul and conscience. While other rock "influences" can be pointed out and traced with some definition, the influence of the blues is so deeply imbedded that it is much more than a mere "influence." As Muddy Waters once sang, "the blues had a baby and they named it 'rock & roll'."

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[i]Palmer, p. 233-234.

[ii]Dixon's "You Need Love" was the subject of an extended and ultimately successful lawsuit with Led Zeppelin, who lifted much of the song for their own "Whole Lotta Love."