

Title:

First a Trickle then a Flood.The Birth of the Blues in Britain

Word Count:

1046

Summary:

As the original Blues artists from the Delta,Chicago and Texas struggled to make their Music heard a few records were discovered by young British kids in the early sixties.The impact of these remarkable sounds on this generation took on a life all of its own and in a couple of years the Blues was the talking point of all Kids interested in music.It was cool to be into R'n'B and to know even a few of the names.What followed changed the World of Music for ever

Keywords:

The Blues,Guitar, Gibson,Les Paul,Bluesbreakers,Mayall,Clapton,Marquee,British Blues,

Article Body:

Chris Barber's Jazz Band with the beautiful Otilie Patterson on vocals brought the sound of New Orleans to British traditional Jazz buffs in the late fifties and early sixties. This was just the beginning of a wave of new sounds that culminated in what came to be known as the British Blues Boom! On Banjo was the great Lonnie Donegan who became the Godfather of Skiffle a year or two later. All of the early musical melting pots were springboards for the next generation of musicians and within a couple of years the Music scene was to change forever.

My first exposure to the blues was on Barber's wonderful L.P. New Orleans Joys. I forget all the titles now but the haunting sounds stirred up strange sensations and led me a few years later to a life long passion for the Blues as I am sure it did with many young kids at the time.

The year 1962 saw the birth of several Blues gigs in London Clubs, notably the Famous Marquee which made its home in Wardour Street, Soho. The great Alexis Korner was to prove to be a nursery slope for what was to come. Cyril Davies on Harp, Dick Heckstall-Smith on the most wailing of saxophones, Mick Jagger (yes that one!) on vocals to name but a few. I guess that first Album recorded live at the Marquee...Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated, started the trickle which very rapidly gathered momentum and soon the Blues was the talking point of all young music heads.

Playing at the Marquee shortly after, in 1963 was the man destined to become the

Godfather of British Blues... John Mayall.... John's famous band, The BluesBreakers went onto fame and fortune as many musicians joined and left in quite a procession over the next couple of years. John celebrated his 70th Birthday a couple of years ago and is playing as well as ever. This gives lie to the notion that life is over at forty and its all downhill from there on. The list of John's protégées is a who's who of the music business; a good proportion of whom are still playing today. John McVie, co-founder of Fleetwood Mac, Mick Fleetwood, Jack Bruce of Cream, Eric "Slowhand" Clapton, Peter Green, Aynsley Dunbar, Mick Taylor and many more.

The band that I believe was the turning point at this time was undoubtedly **The Yardbirds**, whose incredible energy and enthusiasm were absolutely unparalleled on stage. My first exposure to this Juggernaut was on a Monday morning at school one time when some friends told me about this amazing band that they had seen at the Marquee who had a Guitarist that was simply unbelievable. The Year was 1963, the man in question (well he was only 18 years old!) was **Eric Clapton**.

The Legend was already underway at this stage and I believe Eric was responsible for the huge interest brewing in the Blues in Britain as the Yardbirds became household names on the R n' B circuit. Many Guitars were sold at this time as young bloods attempted to emulate Clapton, some with success and many without. Probably one reason for the upsurge in Guitar bands as opposed to wishy washy pop sounds of the time was the discovery of the almost forgotten **Gibson Les Paul** which produced the sound closest to the Chicago Blues of a decade earlier. Eric's use of this instrument took the Blues to a new height and no-one could escape the flood that was on the way. With the Yardbirds there was a mix of Gibson and Fender guitars in use. Eric initially played a Fender Telecaster with Rhythm Guitarist Chris Dreja using the **Gibson 335**, but the favourite in years to come particularly in '65 and '66 was the Les Paul.

In 1963 one of the first Bluesmen to arrive on this side of the Atlantic for a Tour was the legendary Harp player **Sonny Boy Williamson** who recorded a wonderful live album with the Yardbirds that was not released for several years. The restrained backing that the band provided to Sonny Boy showed them to be tight and controlled but Keith Relf the Lead singer and Harpist was a little put out at having to take a back seat to the Master during the gig. Many more Blues legends toured Britain and Europe in the following years which not only revitalised their own flagging careers but gave the budding white Blues players a chance to learn from the Maestros. These include **Howling Wolf** and the legendary **Son House** who had been a contemporary of Robert Johnson in the nineteen thirties. The author was privileged to see Son House play in London in 1970 shortly before he died. He was very frail but he certainly could make that

National Steel Guitar sing sweetly!

The Album that preceded the Flood was of course the 1966 rendition by John Mayall entitled simply "John Mayall's Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton" recorded on the Decca label .This album marked the first vocal airing by Slowhand and he chose Robert Johnson's "Rambling on my Mind" as his debut. The interrelating of Mayall's gutsy Barrelhouse Piano together with Eric's Les Paul and his tentative vocals, wrote a piece of Blues History that day in the studio. That Album sums up for me not only the musicianship involved and the passion of the music but the very essence of the British interpretation of the Blues. I have listened to this song so many times now since the first momentous day that it came through the speakers and every time it's hard to keep the emotions steady.

 The Robert Johnson Legacy forms an integral and vital part of the Birth of the Blues in Britain and is responsible for the undoubted vitality of today's thriving Blues scene on both sides of the Atlantic. There are no Blues Bands past or present who do not owe a debt to Robert Leroy and his magic. His genius and virtuosity with the bottleneck will live forever!