

8 The guitar

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Of all the instruments associated with the blues, the guitar is predominant. And of all the instruments associated with popular culture, the impact of the blues on the guitar – be it in the hands of Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, or Kurt Cobain – is incalculable. But where did it all start? Can you really make a link between the psychedelic explosions of a pop icon (albeit one who would regularly include blues standards in his repertoire) and a lay preacher from the Mississippi Delta like Blind Willie Johnson? And what about the link between the sacred and the secular forms of the music? Today we tend to see blues and gospel as two distinct genres or, as is the case in today's commercially driven world, two separate markets. As we shall see, it wasn't always thus. The two branches share the same roots.

"You know, the blues come out of the field, baby," Sam "Lightning" Hopkins told Sam Charters in 1964. "That's when you bend down, pickin' that cotton and sing 'Oh Lord, please help me.'" Always a secular performer, he was nonetheless at pains to acknowledge the important role of religion, underlining the way in which the line between blues and gospel is often blurred. "The blues is a lot like church . . . when a preacher's up there preachin' the Bible, he's honest to God tryin' to get you to understand these things. Well, singin' the blues is the same thing" (Charters 1965: 375).

The legendary Texan could, and did, sing about different things. Fifty years of performing seasoned, rather than altered, his particular blues and he was emblematic of the rural origins and popular development of the music and the guitar. Essentially a solo performer occasionally accompanied by bass and drums, he almost invariably played a six-string flat-top acoustic guitar, trademark thumb pick providing a constant rhythm, bare fingers stroking the treble strings. He was discovered playing at a church social gathering by the legendary Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Hopkins spent time in prison, on chain gangs, rode boxcars, played at hobo camps and juke joints and, by the late forties, had hit records. He found a new white audience in the sixties and seventies, performing constantly until his death in 1982. Thus he is a link between the pre-war Delta traditions and the modern age, not unlike his contemporary, John Lee Hooker, but a more useful example due to his direct contact with people like the aforementioned Jefferson.

[116] Blind Lemon Jefferson is perhaps best known as the template for the joke which states that in order to be a blues man one needs a handle that is

comprised in equal parts of: an affliction, a fruit, and the surname of a U.S. president. In his time he was a star in both sacred and secular fields. He saw himself first and foremost as a preacher, spreading the word both on and off the pulpit. He would travel from church to church and hundreds of people would flock to watch him perform. In a pre-mass media age, these meetings were essential not only to the dissemination of the gospel, but also to the music in all its variegated forms.

His technique incorporated a loose rhythmic feel and quite an inventive and active instrumental approach, responding to accompanied vocal phrases with single-note runs. There was none of the rhythmic strength of, say, Robert Johnson whose grooves by comparison seem etched in stone. Jefferson, like many of his contemporaries, sacrificed the structure in order to accommodate the performance, his single-string breaks providing a further breathing space in an already flexible sequence. His 1920s recording of “Black Snake Moan” is typical of many rural blues pieces in that, although following a repeated sequence that occurs every twelve bars or so, it does not adhere to the traditional twelve-bar chord progression. Rather than rising to the subdominant on bar 5, it drops down to a dominant chord based in the sixth degree of the major scale in and around bar 7, returning to the tonic at around bar 10 for the duration, before repeating (in the loosest possible sense) the pattern. His single-note runs do not have the clarity of his protégés’, Hopkins appearing to have greater dexterity. No matter.

In an era when we have become accustomed to rigid computerized rhythms, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the somewhat elastic sense of meter used by some of these players. But we can still enjoy the contrasts between players like Jefferson and contemporaries like Mississippi John Hurt, whose ornate and consistent finger picking sounds folksy and Celtic by comparison. Jefferson stroked groups of strings with the flesh of his fingers whereas Hurt would use alternating picking patterns more common to classical guitar or, as mentioned earlier, folk. His 1928 recording of “Stack – O – Lee” (better known as the standard “Stagger Lee”) evinces an unusual degree of instrumental articulation for the genre and the period, probably achieved through the use of fingerpicks (plectra worn on the thumb and fingers of the picking hand) or very strong nails. Not long after this recording Hurt slipped back into obscurity, only to reappear almost thirty years later and be embraced by proponents of the folk craze. A late fifties recording of “Candy Man Blues” from the Newport Folk Festival shows that the voice, as you would expect, has been somewhat seasoned, but the picking remains as sprightly as ever. One can only imagine what fans of Peter, Paul, and Mary made of the bawdy lyrics.

Blind Willie Johnson shared an infirmity, a Founding Father’s surname, and a vocation with Jefferson. Both were preachers and would have thought

themselves out-and-out gospel performers, possibly regarding music as a sideline to their church work. Johnson would have been unlikely to consider himself a virtuoso slide guitarist, responsible for some profound and moving recordings.

Slide guitar is often identified with the blues, but is reckoned to have originated in Hawaii. Towards the end of World War I a Polynesian craze swept the United States, and touring troupes of Hawaiian musicians played to full houses across the country. Performing traditional songs, they utilized “slack key” guitar, wherein a metal bar was slid across raised strings tuned to an open chord – a sound quite familiar now, but revolutionary then.

Common tunings included, and still include: open D (strings tuned D–A–D–F♯–A–D – lowest string to highest), open E (which consists of the same intervals a tone higher), open G (which is D–G–D–G–B–D low to high – this tuning is responsible for a disproportionately high number of songs by the Rolling Stones) and open A (which again is the same tuning a tone higher). Various players adopted favorite tunings. Blind Willie McTell appeared to be fond of D, Robert Johnson of G. I say, “appeared” because of the lack of specific information; other than a few recordings, our only evidence is anecdotal and aural.

Knowledge of the Hawaiian craze would have been likely to have seeped into backwaters of the Deep South, and to have adapted itself well to the sort of instrument likely to have been owned by an itinerant sharecropper, one rather difficult to fret with a warped or broken neck. Techniques associated with the Diddly Bow (from whence Elias McDaniel derived his pseudonym, Bo Diddley) would have applied. This simple instrument was created by stretching a piece of wire or string over a nail hammered into a board, box, or even the side of a house. A piece of metal or glass, such as a bottle or can, was then used to touch the string at various points along its vibrating length to create different pitches while it was strummed, plucked, or picked (Palmer 1991).

The term “bottleneck guitar” describes the preference some players had (and have) for breaking or sawing off the neck of a bottle and wearing it over a finger. Others would use a piece of copper or chrome tubing, bone, and socket wrench or, in Blind Willie Johnson’s case, a pocket knife. Sliding produces vibrato, glissandi, bends, and microtonal inflections that can emulate a human voice. In the correct hands, it is an extremely expressive instrument.

Johnson was possessed of such a pair of hands. His 1929 recording of “God Don’t Never Change” is inspired and inspiring. Evoking the omnipotence of the Almighty in an almost laconic way, he ignores any standard chord progression instead relying on eight-bar phrases repeated over a monotone, alternating a verse and refrain. He provides a solid bass groove

whilst doubling the vocal melody with the slide. Fans of guitarist and sound-track composer Ry Cooder would particularly enjoy it. Indeed Cooder cites Johnson's 1927 recording of "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground" as the inspiration for the memorable theme to the Wim Wenders film "Paris, Texas." Richard Spotswood says of "Dark Was The Night":

I'll resist the temptation to match the emotional eloquence of this performance with words of my own; certainly it belongs on any list of the greatest records ever, powerfully illustrating the spiritual appeal the slide guitar has in the hands of a master . . . a nearly wordless prayer in the form of an intimate dialogue between Johnson and his instrument, assuming the status of performance only through the presence of a microphone. (Spotswood 1991)

The difference between him and his namesake, Robert Johnson, who Charles Shaar Murray calls "the most mythically correct" (Shaar Murray 1999: 399) blues artist, could not be starker. Whereas Blind Willie sang of the Lord's intransigence, Robert sang "If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day" or "Me And The Devil." His songs could be roughly divided into the secular, the misogynistic, and the blasphemous: his impact on rock music is incalculable. Led Zeppelin famously cribbed his line in "Travelling Riverside Blues" in which he suggests that his intended might like to "squeeze my lemon 'til the juice runs down my leg," the Rolling Stones covered "Love In Vain" and "Stop Breakin' Down" and Cream's version of "Crossroads" brought the story of Johnson's alleged pact with the devil to an audience of millions. We have twenty-eight songs and one photograph of him – in which he is dressed in a snappy suit, wearing a wide brimmed hat, and holding an expensive Gibson guitar – not standard fare for an itinerant blues man. Not unlike Christopher Marlowe, the exact manner, place, and reason for his death are shrouded in mystery.

He must have been the Jimi Hendrix or Charlie Parker of his day. The recordings indicate a finesse and swagger unequalled (to the best of our knowledge) by his peers. He is recorded solo, but making enough noise for several men. The rhythm is solid. One could even describe it as funky. Using what sounds like his bare fingers alternating with his thumb, he clearly articulates slide phrases that have now become staples of the musical diet, such as the signature riff to "Travelling Riverside Blues" or emulating the sound of the famous squeezed lemon in the same song.

Alan Lomax, the Library of Congress musicologist who documented Johnson and many others with his field recordings, recalls that the sessions took place in his hotel room and that Johnson was so shy that he faced the wall. Ry Cooder, in a 1982 BBC radio interview, believes that this was not due to timidity at all, but was Johnson utilizing a technique called

“corner loading” which entails playing towards hard surfaces, which are at right angles to each other in order to increase ambience and bass response. The quality of the recordings is remarkably good, as are the performances. The playing is assured; the time is solid although the tempo increases. This has the effect of building excitement as the acceleration is gradual and consistent, and the instrument is well in tune and, at a guess, outfitted with new strings.

Unlikely as it may seem, Johnson had a mentor in the form of the singer, preacher and slide guitarist Son House, whose devotion to his calling would ensure that his secular performances would remain sporadic until his death in the sixties. Another of his protégés was Muddy Waters, to whom we will return later, and yet another associate was a little-known preacher and guitarist, Will Moore. It is not surprising that many of the principal characters in the story of the blues first encountered each other in the Mississippi countryside, and there are many minor players who were important ingredients in the area’s rich musical stew, and in some ways were patrons of the arts. Moore is such an example, who would no doubt have been forgotten but for the exploits of his stepson, John Lee Hooker.

The stepfather seems to have been eager to protect his charge from the pernicious influences of the world of music, teaching the young Hooker the songs and techniques of his contemporaries yet forbidding him to perform. This merely strengthened the boy’s resolve, and he proceeded to move north in and around 1933 (exact dates are never a forte of blues chronology).

His apprenticeship was long, and not necessarily easy. His moves, first to Memphis, later to Cincinnati, and finally to Detroit (but, interestingly enough, not to Chicago) seem to reflect the migratory patterns of rural black America in the years leading up to and including the war. He played in clubs and juke joints, solo and accompanied, worked as a janitor, cinema usher and in a car factory, all the while maintaining his primordial Delta style. Whether he played electric or acoustic guitar, he never abandoned the bare-fingered strumming interrupted by occasional single-note bursts that remains his stock-in-trade.

By 1948 he was popular enough in the Detroit area to come to the attention of a white record producer, Bernard Besman. In those days, producers did little more than try to capture a live performance as quickly as possible. Besman was unusually experimental, using techniques which would not become commonplace for another two decades, although his motivation was purely fiscal – the budget did not extend to paying for a band: the producer recalls trying to fill out the sound as much as possible (Shaar Murray 1999: 131–3). He put a cardboard box beneath Hooker’s stomping foot in order to re-create something akin to a rhythm section and placed a microphone very close to his guitar and overloaded the input channel of the recorder,

creating a deceptively electric sound. A speaker was then placed in front of a toilet bowl, recorded, and mixed in with the original signal, producing a revolutionary slapback echo. One song from these sessions, “Boogie Chillun,” went on to sell a million copies, and Hooker’s journey to international stardom had begun.

Whether alone in a recording studio in the forties, or duetting in the nineties with Bonnie Raitt, Carlos Santana, or Keith Richards, his approach remains remarkably consistent: seated, foot tapping, thumb-down stroking the bass strings, index finger stroking the treble strings, rhythm occasionally broken by flurries of higher-register notes. An open string will often drone the tonic throughout, and Hooker’s tendency to avoid chord changes or to change in unusual places (in the great Delta tradition, ten-, eleven- and thirteen-and-a-half-bar phrases are not uncommon) adds to the exotic quality of his music. His favored tunings are either standard or open A, which many blues players refer to as “Spanish” tuning. Whoever sits in with him has to adapt to his way of doing things, and he has produced a surprising number of successful recordings with guest stars, like “Hooker n’Heat,” “The Healer,” and “Mr. Lucky,” where the guests never swamp or dilute the artist’s identity. Comparison between the performance of “I Cover The Waterfront” on his mid-sixties album *The Real Folk Blues* and the same song on his 1991 album *Mr. Lucky* is instructive. The former is remarkably sparse, accompanied only by the artist’s foot and some spare strummed electric guitar. Using first-position open chords and strumming using the flesh of his fingers or thumb, the result is truly an example of the dictum “less is more.” The more recent version, a duet with Van Morrison, has the backing of a full band including Hammond organ, bass, drums played with brushes, and Morrison playing the guitar part, an insistent sixteenth-note triplet part on electric guitar, probably played using a plectrum and down strokes (at least that’s what he did when I played with him). While this version respects the artist’s integrity and approach, it somehow is less evocative, coloring in as it does the spaces left blank on the original version.

While Hooker was developing his electrified swamp shuffle in Detroit, another transplanted Deltan was making significant waves in Chicago. McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters, is best remembered as a singer, bandleader and songwriter – songs like “Mannish Boy,” “Hootchie Kootchie Man,” and “Seventh Son” are now standards, and popular culture would be very different if he had not written “Rolling Stone.” His influence as a guitarist cannot be underestimated either, bearing in mind his utilization of a particular twentieth-century commodity – electricity.

Until the late 1940s, with the possible exception of modern classical composers and/or boffins like Leon Theremin and Pierre Schaeffer, technology had not altered the sound of music significantly since the invention of the

saxophone. Forms were changing in classical and jazz music, but instrumental timbres remained unaltered. Whatever squeaks and scrapes might be coaxed from, for example, a violin, it remained a violin, be it in a piece by Schubert or Schoenberg, and one can argue that, addition of valves notwithstanding, there isn't a great deal of difference between the instrument used in "Trumpet Voluntary" and that played by Dizzy Gillespie.

Amplification was used sparingly in the late thirties, and allowed certain revolutions in technique. Frank Sinatra would not have been able to develop his singular phrasing without the aid of a microphone, and Charlie Christian's guitar would never have become a lead instrument in Benny Goodman's band. These were, however, amplified sounds in the true sense of the word – a human voice made audible over a big band, the sound of an arch-top guitar increased so that single notes could carry. Up until the 1970s, jazz guitarists like Wes Montgomery, Jim Hall, or Kenny Burrell continued to use the technique pioneered by Christian, using a naturalistic clean sound, particularly suited to sophisticated chord voicings.

As bands like Muddy Waters' or his contemporary Howlin' Wolf's played to increasingly full rooms in an increasingly loud world, they had to increase their volume in order to compete, and in so doing, taxed their equipment to the limit. The distortion that results from an amplifier being overdriven compresses the signal, producing increased sustain and frequency limitation. The combination of electric guitar and an amplifier behaving in such a manner produced something akin to a new instrument, so far removed from its origins that classical guitar maestro Andres Segovia would describe it as an abomination.

This meant that when Waters sang, "I'm a King Bee," he could produce an onomatopoeic sound with his slide on the upper register of his guitar, which would have been untenable on an acoustic instrument. Similarly, his band mate, the harmonica player Little Walter, would amplify his instrument resulting in a sound akin to an entire horn section. Using techniques such as note bending and crossing (using the tonality produced by inhaling as opposed to exhaling as the root) and playing through a distorted amplifier produced a powerful new lead instrument which, when allied with the electric guitar, took the music out of the swamp forever.

The tonality of an overdriven amplifier is not unlike a human voice or a horn. Inflection and phrasing oddities like glissandi and vibrato become more apparent. Notes take longer to decay, facilitating string bending. B. B. King, often considered to be the string-bending pioneer, claims that ignorance and a certain lack of technique forced him to emulate the sound made by his cousin, Bukka White. King was apparently unable to get to grips with a slide, and found other ways of producing a similar sound, and made the world a better place. As regards his technique, he says:

I felt that when I trilled my hand, I got this sound that my ears say was similar to using a bottleneck, because I never could do it the usual way. Like I say, I've got stupid fingers that just won't work.

(Tobler and Grundy 1983: 14)

His stupid fingers helped produce a creamy, vocal tone that is probably the most influential sound in the history of the electric guitar, as is his unique quick vibrato, achieved by using the knuckle of the left-hand index finger as a fulcrum and letting a rocking action of the hand move the string from side to side. Combining a Gibson 355 model (he favored ES 5 s and L5s in the fifties, switching to the semi-hollow 300 series upon its introduction in 1958) with a Fender Twin Reverb amplifier, his tweaks, trills and sustained notes have ensured that the voice of his guitar, named Lucille, is as prominent as his own, and has wormed its way into the sound and technique of countless others including Eric Clapton, Carlos Santana, and Peter Green. Again, the combination of guitar and amp is of paramount importance here, as well as learning the dynamics of both. Dr. King, again:

That's technique, which comes from practising, and it also comes from having a pretty good ear that's able to work with the volume and feedback of the amp in such a way that it eventually becomes professional. What I'm trying to say is that anybody can just turn the guitar up and scream, but to be able to control it without going to your volume controls, but using your ear to tell you when it's getting too loud or not loud enough, takes technique, because you've got to work with the frets there . . .

(Tobler and Grundy 1983: 14)

At the time of writing, King continues to record, and performs hundreds of times per year. Most people are familiar with his soulful, horn-drenched sound. Always the leader of big bands, his tight jazzy revue can be linked to T-Bone Walker's, whose sophisticated brand of big band blues came out of Texas at about the same time as Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown's, the only blues artiste mentioned here that this writer has had the pleasure of working with. Both owing a lot to singer and saxophonist Louis Jordan, they would use horn sections and sophisticated chord voicings and substitutions. In a 1997 interview with Jas Obrecht, Brown referred to his tendency to view his guitar as part of the horn section, and to differentiate himself as a performer:

I'm playin' them horn lines, and I come in and play horn solos. I play the kicks with the band. It's a magical thing . . . and I got something else to say; this record is starting to take me out of the blues scene. I hope so, man, because when they talk about the blues, the whites think of Mississippi and Chicago. Man, I can't stand that kind of stuff. I really can't.

(Obrecht 1997: 88)

By the mid-1950s, the blues was reaching a wide audience, and crossing over into the white populace. The term “blues” was becoming as diverse and all encompassing as its cousin, jazz. Sub-classifications began to emerge, and old style Delta players like Mississippi Fred McDowell and Mississippi John Hurt began to be, as mentioned earlier, incorporated into the folk revival. Gospel became a separate entity. One of the few people to continue in the tradition of performing lay preachers was Elmore James, who believed that the blues was the devil’s music, and that he was firmly in the hands of the prince of darkness when performing. Accordingly, he described his guitar tone as “the gates of hell opening up” (James 1969). The author of what is probably the best-known slide guitar phrase in the history of the genre, he tuned his flat-top acoustic guitar to open D or open E, fitted a magnetic pickup to it and put it through an amplifier set on “stun.” The aforementioned lick, which opens “Dust My Broom,” consists of a fiery sixteenth-note triplet double-stop consisting of the root and the dominant, sliding down to the third and then to the root, all of the notes that would be arrived at naturally by laying a slide across the twelfth fret of a guitar using this tuning. The full band, augmented by a horn section (on some recordings of this often re-recorded song) change on time, follow all the rules and, as you would expect with an aggregation led by Beelzebub, rock.

The guitar tended to feature less in straight gospel performances, providing a more supportive role in songs that were based on hymns and spirituals. One exception was Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who was unusual in that she was a solo female performer who played the electric guitar, by the fifties well on its way to its current position as that most testosterone fueled of instruments. Another influential player in that field was Clive “Pops” Staples, paterfamilias of a group of girls with truly divine voices. His subtle use of tremolo (an electronically produced modulation in volume), rhythmic accents and chord voicings would become a staple of the guitarist’s vocabulary, as evinced in the group’s hit records in the late sixties and early seventies. Other guitarists who would incorporate this styling would include Curtis Mayfield and Jimi Hendrix.

By the later part of the 1950s, a number of small specialty labels emerged from various regions, but none was as important to the dissemination of the blues as Chess records in Chicago. Including all of the pre-eminent performers of the era: Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Willie Dixon (who also served as in-house songwriter, musical director, and A&R), they were able to take some of their artists to a wider audience when, as Muddy Waters put it, the blues had a baby and named it rock’n’roll. While Elvis and Carl Perkins and Bill Haley terrorized God-fearing people everywhere, imagine the effect

provided by Bo Diddley, whose showmanship and tremolo-drenched guitar playing was accompanied by maracas and a high-speed mambo that sounded like an American's idea of jungle drums. The emulations of human speech on "Mumblin' Guitar" would be studied and emulated by the aforementioned Hendrix, and the sexual innuendo of "Mona" and "Who Do You Love" would be copied and redefined by The Doors and The Stones, among countless others. In 1979, British punk super group The Clash would insist on him as their support act on their debut American tour. But Chess had an ace in the hole, a remarkably influential guitarist, singer and songwriter who was also a powerful entertainer, and one of the few black performers to cross over onto white radio and television.

It has often been suggested that had Chuck Berry been born white, he'd have been bigger than Elvis. He might even have obviated the need for Elvis and the Rolling Stones. His distinctive duck walk and rapid-fire double-stop guitar phrases mesmerized audiences everywhere, and he was in the tradition of crowd pleasers like Guitar Slim and T-Bone Walker. But he took the traditions of the twelve-bar blues – apparent in down-tempo tunes like "Wee Wee Hours" – to new lengths, wedding driving, blues based, up-tempo stompers to knowing, witty, literate lyrics. Equally familiar with blues, jazz and country, he told complete stories in three verses, accompanied by guitar phrases that are inseparable from the song. The slid major-sixth chord which heralds the opening of "Memphis, Tennessee" wedded with the Jimmy Reed inspired rhythm track (faithfully duplicated in covers by, among others, Lonnie Mack, and The Faces) evokes the story of lost love leading up to the punch line "Marie is only six years old . . ." The sixteenth-note triplet augmented chord that starts "School Days" is as ugly as any alarm clock can be at the crack of dawn. Each sung phrase is answered by a double-stop down-stroke guitar phrase, ending in the chiming chorus "Hail, Hail Rock and Roll" answered by a line evocative of a school bell at the end of a long day. This call and response is rooted in the Delta tradition, but paints a picture a world away: of bobby socks, blue jeans and burger joints that will forever be innocent 1950s America. The fact that the author was a black man in his thirties makes it all the more remarkable.

By the beginning of the sixties, the influence of the blues guitar was all pervasive. Performers like Buddy Holly were taking the influence of Bo Diddley to white audiences through songs like "Not Fade Away," and California surfers found a soundtrack in guitar instrumentals like Dick Dale's "Miserlou" and The Ventures' "Pipeline." Texan blues artist Freddie King recorded an album of instrumentals and found himself with a crossover hit. Signed to Chicago's King records, his recordings with a band of seasoned professionals took the blues format a little bit further. "The Stumble" weds a

memorable melody to a chord progression which departs from the standard twelve-bar format – starting on the IV, returning to I on bar 3, up to IV on bar 5, and then to V on bar 7, before arriving at a stop-time break in which a diminished chord leads to a I–VI–II–V turnaround, a jazz staple. “Driving Sideways” stays on I for four bars, reverting to V on bar 5. “Hideaway” is more of a standard twelve-bar, but with added stop-time sections and time changes to keep the listener interested. It was a huge hit in 1961, and found another audience when John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers covered it on their debut record. Their guitarist, Eric Clapton, saw a photograph of King playing a Gibson Les Paul, and decided that he had to have one too – although by the time he finally obtained one, his hero had switched to a Gibson 345 like his namesake, B. B. Despite using finger and thumb picks, his technique owed little to people like Lightnin’ Hopkins, being another player who was inspired by the saxophone. “I play my guitar like Louis Jordan used to play his horn,” he said in an interview with *Guitar Player* magazine not long before his death in 1976. “That’s the same sound that I get” (F. King 1976).

The third of the Three Kings was Albert – like the other two, no relation. A native of Mississippi, he achieved his biggest success in the sixties when he recorded in Memphis for the legendary Stax label, home to such soul stars as Otis Redding and Sam and Dave. The fusion of blues and soul was made in heaven, with the peerless house band of Booker T. and the M. G.s (purveyors of the classic “Green Onions”) and the Memphis Horns providing a funky foundation for King’s razor-sharp tone and wide bends. These were achieved by playing a conventionally strung guitar left handed, and not re-stringing, as other left handers like Charlie Christian or Jimi Hendrix were wont to do. Having the highest string at the top of the fretboard not only gives it a great range, but pulling from above rather than pushing from below (the most common string-bending technique) enables other strings to be bent simultaneously, allowing for King’s remarkable multi-timbral phrasing. His choice of guitar – a Gibson Flying V – allowed unprecedented access to the upper reaches of the fretboard, too. Eric Clapton brought him to the attention of a wider audience in the sixties when Cream covered his classic “Born Under A Bad Sign,” and his influence on players like Jimi Hendrix, Robert Cray, and Stevie Ray Vaughan is incalculable.

In Britain in the late fifties and early sixties, blues aficionados like Alexis Korner and John Mayall would find a willing group of young acolytes who may not have been aware of the rich cultural traditions of the music they loved, but just loved the sound. Sonny Boy Williamson is reputed to have said of the Yardbirds, his backing group on an early sixties U.K. tour, “They want to play the blues so bad . . . and they do!” but others, like Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Bo Diddley were more encouraging of their young European

admirers. Upon arriving in America for the first time, the Rolling Stones could not believe that their American idols were not household names – after all, they had played to the same young audiences in Britain night after night. When their American popularity ensured a spot on the popular teenage show “Shindig,” one of the Stones’ provisos for appearing was that Howlin’ Wolf open the show. This provided a bemused wide American television audience with their first exposure to their own legacy. To this day, many Americans make a pilgrimage to Liverpool because they think it is the birthplace of rock’n’roll.

It wasn’t purely down to longhaired British art school students to educate white America. In Chicago, middle-class white boys like Michael Bloomfield and Paul Butterfield honed their skills on guitar and harmonica by watching, and copying, artists like Buddy Guy and James Cotton perform in South Side clubs. The Butterfield Blues Band would approach their subject with the same missionary zeal as John Mayall’s band in Britain, or Al Wilson’s Canned Heat in northern California. A pair of albino brothers must have been quite a sight in Texas juke joints when Johnny and Edgar Winter popped in to listen or play. Parts of the Butterfield Band would join Bob Dylan for his legendary electrification, Canned Heat would be a huge hit at Woodstock, and Johnny Winter would be the most expensive signing in the history of Columbia Records in 1969. Blues – whether interpreted in the form of meandering jams by the Grateful Dead in San Francisco, or loud riffs by the Earth Blues Band in Birmingham (who would find greater success when they changed their name to Black Sabbath) – had been subsumed into the mainstream.

As the seventies grew to a close, people began to get used to the idea of rock stars being elder statesmen as their heroes stumbled out of drink or drug rehabilitation programs. Some of them chose to use their lofty position to thank some of the people who provided them with the cash flow that nearly killed them. Johnny Winter produced Muddy Waters’ “Hard Again,” an epochal return to the rawness of the fifties Chess recordings. Keith Richards put together an all-star band to celebrate Chuck Berry’s sixtieth birthday, filmed as “Hail, Hail Rock and Roll” and Eric Clapton’s blues nights at the Albert Hall are almost as regular a part of the social calendar as the First Night of the Proms. John Lee Hooker would have to wait until the nineties for his much-deserved Grammys and all-star duets, but the blues would never again be part of the mainstream.

Gospel became a marketing term, but the influence of earlier performers like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Aretha Franklin became apparent in mainstream successes like Whitney Houston and Mary J. Blige. Out-and-out gospel choirs like Sounds of Blackness would find a large and affluent black audience, but the role of the guitar would be marginal.

As Punk, New Romanticism, Hip-Hop and Dance infatuated the public, a younger generation of blues guitarists would return to different eras in the history of the music. Stevie Ray Vaughan would reacquaint his audience with the work of Guitar Slim, Buddy Guy and Albert King as well as establishing Jimi Hendrix in the blues pantheon before joining it himself courtesy of a helicopter crash. His brother Jimmie, a long-serving member of The Fabulous Thunderbirds who kept alive the work of arcane artistes like Slim Harpo and Lazy Lester, would play at the inauguration of president George W. Bush. So too would fellow hirsute Texans Z. Z. Top, who allegedly provided funds to turn the shack in which Muddy Waters was born into a national monument. In America, there is a chain of restaurants and venues part owned by veteran rockers Aerosmith and comic actor Dan Ackroyd called “The House of Blues,” which combines an up-market Planet Hollywood approach to soul food (the cuisine of the Deep South) and decor which resembles a highly decorated rural shack. Performing at the New Orleans branch, located in the French Quarter, is a surreal experience.

Others have persevered in a more low-key way. Johnny Winter has recorded for blues labels like Alligator and Point Blank, and has been a fixture on the blues circuit for over twenty years, abandoning the capes and rhinestone suits of the seventies. Younger performers like Eric Bibb, Ben Harper, Sonny Landreth, and Keb Mo’ explore all areas of the blues, from Delta-influenced musings to reinterpretations of Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love.” Olu Dara does what Taj Mahal has been doing for thirty years, which is exploring roots and branches of the blues in African and Caribbean music. Ry Cooder recorded with Malian guitarist Ali Farka Toure, who in turn has been assiduous in showing the world the African origins of the blues.

There are a few survivors of the old days in the Mississippi Delta. Henry “Mule” Townsend spent the early years of the twenty-first century touring the U.S. and Europe – seventy-two years after making his first commercial recordings. Along with Honeyboy Edwards, Homesick James, and Robert Lockwood Jr. (who spent his early years playing with Robert Johnson), they called themselves the Delta Blues Cartel and played as they always have. At the other end of the spectrum, little-known Mississippi guitarist R. L. Burnside found unlikely collaborators in the form of the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, who despite their name are New York post-punkers who mix deconstructed riffs with break beats and samples. Their late nineties album, *A Ass Pocket of Whisky*, led to Burnside recording with younger producers who have worked with alternative rock acts like Beck and Liz Phair, who utilize contemporary sounds and techniques. Unlike other anachronisms – Muddy Waters’ late sixties foray into psychedelia *Electric Mud* springs to

mind – these recordings actually work. Burnside's *I Wish I Was In Heaven Sitting Down* is one of the best albums of 2000, in any genre.

Whatever happens to the blues guitar, it is clear that we are at the end of an era. As Robert Palmer says in an article on the Delta Blues Cartel, which could easily apply to any of the old masters, they are “better understood as deans of the old school who helped to author its code . . . when they pass, so go the mysteries . . . and all the wisdom that lay within” (Palmer 2001: 48).