

## 6 A century of blues guitar

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### The pioneers

A century ago, the first strains of blues guitar echoed across the American South. While the style's exact origins are lost in the distant traditions of field hollers and work songs, African influences, spirituals, ragtime, minstrel tunes, folk and pop fare, parlor instrumentals, and other musical forms, one thing is certain: From the beginning, the blues and the guitar have traveled side by side.

The earliest reported sighting of a blues performance occurred in 1903, when bandleader W. C. Handy was awakened in the Tutwiler, Mississippi train station by the strange sounds of a ragged black guitarist. "As he played," Handy wrote in his autobiographical *Father of the Blues*, "he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by the Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly: 'Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.' The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard."<sup>1</sup> The man was singing about Moorehead, Mississippi, where the Southern Railroad crossed the Yazoo–Delta Railroad, "the Yellow Dog." Once Handy began orchestrating "Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor" and other popular black folk tunes, his bookings increased. His conclusion? "Negroes react rhythmically to everything. That's how the blues came to be."<sup>2</sup> Handy also described the fundamental structure of the blues which has remained a constant for almost a hundred years: "The songs consisted of simple declarations expressed usually in three lines and set to a kind of earth-born music that was familiar throughout the Southland."<sup>3</sup> Two identical or similar lines were typically answered by a third, and the whole verse was sung over a pattern involving one to three chords set to a straightforward or propulsive rhythm. Unlike field hollers and work songs, the blues was music of leisure; unlike ballads, it allowed complete self-expression. A bluesman could brag, nag, howl at God, diss "the man," or make passionate come-ons. He could fashion himself into a hero, victim, or savior.

Blues music quickly proliferated throughout the South. By 1905, Ma Rainey was singing blues songs with her traveling tent show, and Rev. Gary

Davis had heard “Candy Man” and “Cocaine Blues” in rural South Carolina. But nowhere was the blues more popular than along the Mississippi River, where it was spread by riverboats and medicine shows. Perry Bradford, who oversaw the recording of the world’s first blues record, remembered, “The South was especially crazy about the blues, a cry of a broken heart that echoed from every levee and bayou up and down the Mississippi River.”<sup>4</sup>

To country preachers and other churchified folk, the blues was “devil’s music,” fit only for “cornfield niggers,” to use the common parlance of the day. Johnny Shines, who rambled with Robert Johnson during the 1930s, recalled, “When I was a kid, if a person heard you singing the blues and recognized your voice, you couldn’t go down to their house, around their daughters.”<sup>5</sup> To some, even the guitar itself was taboo: when young W. C. Handy proudly brought one home, his father forced him to swap it for a dictionary.

Many of the first-generation blues guitarists lived in an environment as dangerous and unforgiving as any modern ’hood. Few could read or write. Some were blind or missing limbs; many in the South and Texas were trapped in a crooked sharecropping system that kept them in perpetual servitude. Even the slightest infraction of the strict Jim Crow laws – using a “whites only” drinking fountain, for instance, or failing to step off the sidewalk to make way for a white woman – could lead to the chain gang, torture, and lynching. Some Southern communities greeted travelers with signs proclaiming “Nigger, don’t let the sun go down on you here.” Chain gangs were common sights; extreme poverty was the norm. “In Mississippi,” remembered one old bluesman, “it was open season on black folk.”<sup>6</sup>

Within many black communities, though, playing blues did have its rewards. Come Saturday night, country blues performers such as Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson were *stars* who could find moonshine, tips, and appreciative women in virtually any black community, work camp, or non-religious gathering. Most prewar blues songs were set to acoustic instruments – just about every imaginable configuration of piano, harmonica, fiddle, mandolin, banjo, bass, clarinet, saxophone, drums, washboard, and homemade instruments – but most often, especially in rural areas, by an acoustic guitar made by Stella, Gibson, Harmony, or National. As B. B. King remembered,

Where I grew up at in the Mississippi Delta, there was no other instrument that was available to you besides guitar, really, but maybe a harmonica. And everybody didn’t want to blow somebody else’s harmonica. But everybody that thought in terms of music would have an old piece of guitar somewhere – usually. In my area, they couldn’t afford keyboards of any kind. Only time I ever seen a piano or organ was when I went to church.<sup>7</sup>

Most Southern blues guitarists started out playing a one-string diddley bow fashioned by attaching a broom wire to a wall and using bottles or rocks as bridges. One hand plucked, while the other fretted or slid along the string with a bottle. Many outstanding guitarists – Robert Johnson, Elmore James, and B. B. King among them – began this way. Others fashioned primitive guitars by attaching a tin can or cigar box to a rough-hewn neck. Those who could save up enough money ordered guitars by catalog, which is how European-influenced parlor guitar music came to exert a profound influence upon the development of blues guitar.

During the late 1800s, parlor music was the rage in white America, and most catalog-bought guitars arrived with a tutorial pamphlet featuring rudimentary songs for the beginner. Two of the most common, “Spanish Fandango” and “Sebastopol,” predated the Civil War, and both called for the strings to be tuned to open chords. “Spanish Fandango” in particular served as a starting point for countless rural players, and its harmonic content, voice-leading, and finger-picking pattern flowed directly into the blues of Robert Wilkins, Son House, Furry Lewis, and many others who mastered the song. To this day, the term “Spanish” is sometimes used to describe open G tuning (DGDGBD), while “Sebastopol” refers to open D (DADF#AD).

While blues music was being played throughout the early twentieth century, no one recorded any samples of it until 1920, when Mamie Smith’s jazzy “Crazy Blues” became a breakthrough hit that inspired studio execs to record dozens of women blues singers over the next few years. The recording of solo blues guitarists did not commence until November 23, 1923, when Sylvester Weaver of Louisville, Kentucky, recorded “Guitar Blues,” an instrumental with slide melodies and sparse chords, performed lap style with a knife. In ads in *The Chicago Defender* and other black newspapers, Weaver’s label, Okeh Records, proclaimed him “The Man With the Talking Guitar,” who “certainly plays ’em strong on his big, mean, blue guitar.” Weaver was also the first guitarist to back a blues singer on record, a feat he’d accomplished just a week earlier with Sara Martin. By January 1924, Bessie Smith and Clara Smith were recording classic blues with studio guitarists.

The first blues guitar heroes emerged in 1926, when Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake 78s were released on Paramount Records. Singing of booze, gambling, and dirty mistreating mamas, Jefferson had lived the themes that dominated his songs. He was raised in rural Texas, and had mostly played in the bordellos and streets of Dallas, where his wail could cut across the din of floozies and flivvers. Some of his lyrics were unadorned poetry – jivey and risqué, lonesome and forlorn, a stunning view of society from the perspective of someone at the bottom. Jefferson was a remarkable guitarist, too, flat-picking muscular bass lines and launching into elaborate,

meter-stretching solos. “His touch is different from anybody on the guitar – still is,” said lifelong fan B. B. King. “I practiced, I tried, I did everything, and still I could never come out with the sound as he did. He was majestic, and he played just a regular little 6-string guitar with a little round hole. It was unbelievable to hear him play. And the way he played with his rhythm patterns, he was way before his time.”<sup>8</sup> When he died in 1929, Blind Lemon Jefferson was America’s most famous bluesman. His influence was especially felt among white country blues performers such as Frank Hutchinson, Charlie Poole, and Riley Puckett.

Raised along the East Coast, Blind Blake was more swinging and sophisticated. Billed as “The Man With the Famous Piano-Sounding Guitar,” he was a fast and facile finger-picker and the unrivalled master of ragtime syncopation. His warm, relaxed voice was a far cry from Jefferson’s harsh country blues, and his songs were more urban. Some of Blake’s 78s cast him as a hip-talking jazzman or hustling ladies man; others walked the long, lonely road to the gallows. During his heyday, Blake earned most of his income playing Southside Chicago house rent parties. With a piano in the living room, his apartment at 31st and Cottage Grove was the scene of many jams with Little Brother Montgomery, Charlie Spand, Roosevelt Sykes, Tampa Red, Big Bill Broonzy, and other blues notables.

Lonnie Johnson, who launched his recording career in late 1925, became by far the most influential prewar blues guitarist. His dexterity, advanced harmonic sensibility, and distinctive tone sparkled on his classic jazz sessions with Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, his unsurpassed jazz guitar duets with Eddie Lang, and stacks of his own blues, sentimental tunes, and ballads. Johnson became the hero of Robert Johnson, T-Bone Walker, B. B. King, and John Lee Hooker, among countless others. He could double on several instruments and knew many guitar styles, from backwoods country stomps to exhilarating solos and dazzling chord climbs. On his records in the 1920s and 1930s, he played a modified nine-string guitar (a twelve-string minus the lower octave strings), using his one-of-a-kind finger vibrato to approximate the sounds of a zither, mandolin, or bottleneck guitar. Lonnie Johnson played well into the 1960s, and was, as Ry Cooder describes, “one of the transcendental people who influenced everybody.”<sup>9</sup>

Mississippi was the birthplace of a wide variety of prewar blues styles and performers. Bolton was home of the state’s most famous string band, the Chatmon family’s Mississippi Sheiks. Descendants of slaves, the Chatmons played to white and black audiences alike, drawing on minstrel tunes, hokum, ragtime, downhome blues, and whining hillbilly music. Their 1930 hit recording of “Sitting on Top of the World” was widely copied, and one of the band’s guitarists, Bo Carter, found success as a solo artist as well. In Jackson, Rube Lacy fronted a string band with Son Spand; both men were

adept at guitar and mandolin. While Lacy was known as “the blues king,” he nodded to another local, Tommy Johnson, as the superior musician. Johnson played with a slippery, danceable swing that mixed double- and triple-meter picking and strumming patterns, and his walking bass in “Big Road Blues” became a staple of the Delta blues guitar style. Johnson sang with a warm, high-pitched voice with a very effective falsetto, and sometimes recorded with guitarist Charlie McCoy, who also made records with Ishman Bracey as well as under his own name. Besides blues, the musicians played waltzes and popular tunes.

Skip James from Bentonia was another Jackson regular, but he was an aloof, enigmatic figure who mostly kept to himself. He tuned to an open E minor chord and accompanied his eerie, high-pitched falsetto with masterly finger-picking. With his “rediscovery” in the early 1960s, James became a favorite at folk and blues festivals and something of a mentor to struggling young guitarists.

Fife and drum bands were popular in the northeast Mississippi hill country, as were string bands augmented with saxophones and trumpets, kazoos (or “jazz horns”), wax-papered combs, and percussion ranging from tambourines, woodblocks, and homemade drums to tubs, crates, cans, and chairs. The most popular instrument there, however, was the guitar, as it was in northwest Mississippi, where Charley Patton emerged as the archetypal first-generation Delta bluesman. As a young man, Patton was enamored with the playing of Henry Sloan, an older musician who mostly strummed chords. Patton was among the first Delta musicians to apply intricate rhythms and open tunings to blues music. The gruff singer had moved to Dockery’s plantation in the heart of the Delta before World War I, and for many years thereafter performed at juke joints, parties, and picnics with Tommy Johnson, Willie Brown, and Son House. Patton’s celebrated clowning – riding his guitar like a mule, playing behind his head – predated the showboating antics of Guitar Slim, Buddy Guy, and Jimi Hendrix.

Out in the country, most Delta musicians played picnics and Saturday-night getbacks, which were usually held in someone’s shack, as Johnny Shines detailed:

If you sell corn whiskey, on Saturday night, you’re going to have a getback. You just take the bed and things down, probably throw sand on the floor, and you put a crap table in the back room, card table somewheres else, and then a dance floor and the musicians in the main room. You’d put a table or a door across something and sell fried fish.<sup>10</sup>

The best money was usually made working alone or in pairs. Once the cotton was planted, the better musicians traveled around from plantation to plantation. Sometimes the plantation store, already the sharecroppers’

gathering point, doubled as a juke joint, with a room in back for gambling, dancing, and drinking moonshine.

In larger Mississippi towns like Jackson, Clarksdale, and West Helena, blues musicians played on well-traveled street corners. With the repeal of prohibition in 1933, a scattering of clubs opened in some of the larger river towns. “After Prohibition was broke,” Johnny Shines explained, “whiskey come back. And then you could go into little taverns and play. But you went in on your own. They wasn’t hiring you. There was many times when I just went in and sit down, and the guy said, ‘You play?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Sit over there and play us a tune.’ You sit there and play all night, long as people are pitchin’ in nickels and dimes. Sit there and make yourself seven or eight dollars, and that was good money in those days. People work for much less than that for a week.”<sup>11</sup> West Helena, Arkansas, scene of the ever-popular *King Biscuit Time* daily radio show and several wide-open gambling joints, was an especially alluring destination for bluesmen from Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee.

### Early recordings

The majority of the great prewar Delta blues recordings are directly attributable to H. C. Speir, a white music store owner in Jackson who served as a talent scout for RCA Victor and Paramount. Speir showed a prophetic taste for blues, arranging sessions for Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, Willie Brown, Tommy Johnson, Ishman Bracey, the Mississippi Sheiks, Robert Johnson, and several others who likely would never have recorded without his intercession. By the end of the 1930s, over forty Mississippi artists had made 78s.

The Delta style is characterized by a strong rhythmic pulse, the use of a slide with open tunings, and thumbed bass notes. Unlike most of his peers, Charley Patton cradled his guitar on his lap to slide, a technique that was most likely brought to the United States mainland during the Hawaiian music craze just after the turn of the century. But another source figured prominently in the creation of bottleneck blues, especially in the rural South. “Slide come from Africa,” insisted Johnny Shines. “Matter of fact, all your American music come out of slaves. See, everybody think the bottleneck is something new. The bottleneck was the first guitar playing that the black people did, because he didn’t know how to chord a guitar. So he tuned a guitar to open tuning, and he used a slide to make his chords. Before Charley Patton, we only knew cross [open] tunings, and we only knew how to play with the bottleneck.”<sup>12</sup>

A convicted murderer and failed preacher, Son House developed his ferocious slide style in the late 1920s, matching powerful bass notes with

propulsive treble slides. Portions of his “My Black Mama” and other songs flowed directly into the repertoires of his followers Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, who came to epitomize the Delta slide style. “Me and my guitar, we have a conversation and talk together,” Waters explained. “That’s from the Delta style.”<sup>13</sup> Other notable Mississippi slidemen included raspy-voiced Bukka White, with his hypnotic guitar-body percussion and slashing slide, and Crying Sam Collins, who emphasized feeling over proper tuning and regular changes. Joe Holmes, who recorded as King Solomon Hill, used his bottleneck to imitate Lonnie Johnson riffs. Mississippi John Hurt, from Avalon, was another talented slider, but also played beautifully syncopated bare-fingered arrangements. Robert Wilkins of Hernando likewise played both slide and bare-fingered, often in open E tuning, while his neighbor Garfield Akers specialized in droning open-ended stomps.

While Muddy Waters would become the man most responsible for carrying Delta blues into the blues-rock mainstream, Robert Johnson deserves credit for creating its most brilliant recordings. “Robert Johnson is the greatest folk-blues guitar player that ever lived,” declared Eric Clapton. “He’s the greatest singer, the greatest writer.”<sup>14</sup> Johnson mastered the Delta style as none had before, learning firsthand from men such as Willie Brown and Son House. He then expanded his music with outside influences from 78s by Lonnie Johnson, Kokomo Arnold, Leroy Carr, and many others, becoming a veritable “human jukebox,” as former acquaintances remembered him. Johnson was truly standing at a musical crossroads when he recorded his twenty-nine songs in 1937 and 1938, simultaneously looking back to old-time Delta blues while foretelling the future of electric blues, R&B, and rock and roll.

The Delta blues style thrived in nearby Memphis, especially in the inevitable street renditions of “Poor Boy a Long Ways from Home” and “Roll and Tumble Blues,” first recorded in 1929 by Hambone Willie Newbern. Memphis had long been a Mecca for musicians of all varieties. Along Beale Street, thumping country stompers commingled with fife-and-drum ensembles, jazz musicians, hillbillies, bluesmen, and local jug bands led by Gus Cannon and Will Shade. Guitarists Frank Stokes, Jim Jackson, Furry Lewis, and Robert Wilkins were Memphis regulars, while Hambone Willie Newbern, Sleepy John Estes, Mississippi John Hurt, and many others journeyed there to record.

One popular Memphis guitar style was based on pre-blues banjo technique, balancing thumbed bass strums with fingerpicked treble melodies. Played with a bottleneck by someone like Furry Lewis, these stark melodies could be extraordinarily moving. Some of Lewis’s inspiration came from Gus Cannon, who around the turn of the century specialized in playing slide banjo while blowing through a jug tied around his neck. Over the

decades, Lewis's voice became as deeply haunting as the whining slide that echoed his words or finished his lines.

Another thriving blues community was headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. Peg Leg Howell played his primitive country blues on a six-string, while several other leading Atlanta bluesmen favored twelve-string instruments. Robert Hicks, who recorded as Barbecue Bob, played twelve-string in a fast, rhythmic style, alternating between bass runs and ringing, frantic bottleneck. He was sometimes accompanied by his brother, twelve-stringer Charley Lincoln; the sheer drive of their playing was occasionally matched by that of their pal, Curley Weaver. By 1928, the best twelve-stringer in town was Blind Willie McTell, who could do it all – slide, ragtime, gospel, blues, imitations of cackling hens and crowing roosters, pianos, and train sounds. Playing with a light touch on a big-bodied Stella twelve-string, McTell created shifting rhythms and resonant melodies that were as distinctive as his clear, somewhat nasal voice. Like Lead Belly, he recorded commercially as well as for the Library of Congress.

Georgia-bred, Mississippi-raised Kokomo Arnold recorded stacks of speedy, adventurous, and downright manic slide 78s, playing both lap style and regular with a flexible sense of time. Robert Johnson recycled portions of his records in "Sweet Home Chicago" and "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom," which, in turn, inspired Elmore James's roaring, reverb-drenched "Dust My Broom" of the 1950s. Casey Bill Weldon, who recorded in Atlanta and Chicago, freely drew from Hawaiian music and swing. Regional sounds developed elsewhere as well. In the Southeast's tobacco belt, Blind Blake's 78s were especially popular, while Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Gary Davis, William Moore, and Willie Walker blended ragtime and blues. St. Louis and East St. Louis had a thriving piano scene headed by Peetie Wheatstraw, Roosevelt Sykes, and Walter Davis, as well as their own guitar stars, such as Lonnie Johnson-influenced Charlie Jordan, and Henry Townsend, who doubled on piano and guitar.

Beaumont, Texas was the fearsome stage for Blind Willie Johnson, a street-corner evangelist with a fierce growl of a voice. On his landmark 1920s gospel and spiritual recordings, Johnson used a pocketknife slide to double his voice, finish a verse, or play a sparking solo. Many of his songs were gathered from old hymnals, and when the spirit moved him, his gruff voice shook with vibrato. His playing displays an exquisite sense of melody, timing, and tone. How fitting that a copy of his landmark instrumental "Dark Was The Night – Cold Was The Ground" (along with music by Chuck Berry and Beethoven) now travels toward the stars aboard the spacecraft *Voyager*.

Dallas's Central Tracks district, with its rows of black-owned stores, saloons, barbershops, and brothels, was the stomping ground of many fine Texas bluesmen, including Blind Lemon Jefferson, Henry Thomas, Willard



“Ramblin’” Thomas, T-Bone Walker, and singer Texas Alexander. Henry Thomas, who played as “Ragtime Texas” aboard trains making the rounds from Dallas to Houston, favored a heavy, stomping strum and occasionally used a capo high on the neck to strum his guitar like a banjo. He also blew quills, creating a sound similar to Mississippi fife music. Ramblin’ Thomas, who divided his time between Dallas and Shreveport, Louisiana, tended to pluck a few bass notes or quick, partial chords, followed by a slide figure that doubled his relaxed vocals or added counterpoint. His younger brother Jesse was a more advanced guitarist, as evidenced by the long, flowing, slideless lines on his 1929 Victor sides.

From southwest Louisiana came Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly. Lead Belly’s voice was field-holler powerful, his twelve-string guitar playing forceful and nimble. He plied muscular bass lines and had an instinctual feel for time, easily changing tempos to heighten a song’s drama. Like his acquaintance Blind Lemon, he excelled at speedy single-string breaks. Lead Belly’s repertoire was estimated at 500 songs, and he recorded everything from cattle calls, slave songs, and spirituals to square dances, children’s music, and Tin Pan Alley. “But when does your guitar talk the best?” his friend Woody Guthrie asked him on a record. “Well,” Lead Belly drawled, “my guitar talk the best when I’m playin’ and singin’ blues.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Urban blues guitarists**

Up north, a smoother, more urban style of blues was taking hold. Indianapolis-based Leroy Carr, a dominating force in blues piano, and his longtime partner, talented guitarist Francis “Scrapper” Blackwell, scored a runaway hit with their June 1928 recording of “How Long – How Long Blues,” which was one of the first songs learned by Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters.

In Chicago, studio musicians Georgia Tom Dorsey and slide virtuoso Hudson “Tampa Red” Whittaker teamed up in October 1928 to record the hokum classic “It’s Tight Like That,” which became one of the era’s best-selling blues records. Their follow-up, “It’s Tight Like That, No. 2,” was the first release to proclaim Tampa Red “The Guitar Wizard,” a title he certainly deserved. With his sweet resonant tone, good-time feeling, and perfect intonation, Tampa Red was instantly recognizable on records, and he made hundreds of good ones. His early ensembles were crucial to the development of Chicago blues bands, and several of the songs he composed or popularized – “Love Her With a Feeling,” “Crying Won’t Help You,” “Sweet Little Angel,” and “It Hurts Me Too” – have become blues standards. Tampa Red’s influence stretched all the way from Mississippians Robert Nighthawk,

Muddy Waters, B. B. King, Earl Hooker, and Elmore James to western swing bands and prescient rock and rollers.

Another high wizard of hokum, Big Bill Broonzy, was also a frontrunner in the development of more urban-sounding blues. Raised in Mississippi and based in Chicago, Broonzy was a persuasive singer whose abilities covered many styles, allowing him to enjoy one of the longest careers in blues history. At his peak in the late twenties and early thirties, he excelled at stride-influenced, syncopated playing. He was extremely adept at stomps and fast jive, and the bent notes and hammer-ons of his slow blues were especially poignant. Broonzy proved exceptionally inventive when working within a twelve-bar format, drawing on a seemingly endless variety of string bends, multi-string slides, and other flashy embellishments. Unlike most bluesmen raised in the South, he played most of his works in C, the most common ragtime key. After World War II, Broonzy would play a crucial role in popularizing blues in Great Britain.

By the late 1930s, many Chicago-based blues artists – piano giants Big Maceo Merriweather and Memphis Slim, harmonica ace John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson, percussionist Washboard Sam, and guitarists Broonzy, Tampa Red, Memphis Minnie, Big Joe Williams, and Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup – were recording for producer and A&R man Lester Melrose. Occasionally exhilarating but often bland, Melrose’s ensemble recordings of blues, jazz, and novelty numbers for Columbia and Victor’s Bluebird subsidiary created a market-dominating sound that became known as the “Bluebird Beat.” Before the war, these records tended to feature guitar and piano, with occasional support from clarinet, washboard, string bass, and harmonica or kazoo. By the end of World War II, drums and electric guitar had become part of the mix.

Tampa Red was among the first Chicago blues performers to acquire an electric guitar, which he featured on “Anna Lou Blues” from 1940. Two years earlier, though, studio guitarist George Barnes had used an electric guitar on his Chicago sessions with Big Bill Broonzy, Hattie Bolten, Blind John Davis, Jazz Gillum, Merline Johnson, and Washboard Sam. (“When I was young, I hung around Lonnie Johnson,” Barnes recalled, “and he taught me how to play the blues. I made over a hundred records with fellows like Big Bill Broonzy, Blind John Davis, and a host of other bluesmen. I was the only white musician on these dates.”<sup>16</sup>) By the early 1940s, Memphis Minnie, Big Bill Broonzy, and Moody Jones also had electric guitars.

Like their jazz counterparts, the initial wave of electric blues guitarists were deeply influenced by Charlie Christian, who in 1939 made his spectacular debut with Benny Goodman, leader of the era’s most popular swing ensemble. On session after session, Christian had the tonal strength and improvisational ability to play long, flowing solos on a par with those of his

bandmates, some of whom were the best in jazz. His impact was immediate, inspiring many acoustic guitarists to switch to amplified guitars, just as Eddie Lang had inspired a massive shift from banjo to acoustic guitar during the 1920s. “The electric guitar as Charlie Christian played it had its own sound,” recalled Barney Kessel. “Charlie was the first one to play single lines like a horn. And Charlie’s tone was the concept for what is being used today in jazz.”<sup>17</sup> Soon after Christian’s untimely death in 1941, the sound he pioneered would resound in a dynamic new blues style led by Aaron “T-Bone” Walker.

### **The postwar blues**

At the outbreak of World War II, Jim Crow laws and other social abuses were prevalent throughout the South, and for field hands such as Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and B. B. King, life had become nearly intolerable. Work agents passing through Southern towns spread the word that jobs were plentiful up north, and thousands of sharecroppers and laborers heard their call and headed north, where, it was believed, people could forge their own destinies among sprawling cities of opportunity. “There was a big demand for steel-driving men and strong-backed women to come north and work in the steel mills and factories,” explained New Orleans bluesman Danny Barker. “Automobile industry was begging for help, the steel mills of Detroit, Gary, Indiana, Cleveland, Ohio, Cincinnati. All said, ‘Come north. We need workers.’ And that’s where the Southerners went, because the pay was better and it was a different environment, especially for black people. Above the Mason-Dixon line, where there was less pressure on you, you could walk tall and walk free.”<sup>18</sup>

“There was more freedom,” agreed Texas bluesman Sammy Price. “You could laugh if you wanted to. In the South, sometimes you’d laugh and the cop put you in jail, thinkin’ you laughing at him. Or he put you in for any reason. But when you went to Chicago, you had places where you could actually go in, buy a drink, and drink it, and you didn’t have to bow your head in order to get out of the place. It was a community feeling. People were meeting new friends. All of these things had a lot to do with the clubs in the North.”<sup>19</sup>

Tampa Red and Big Bill Broonzy, Chicago’s top guitarists in the mid 1940s, were renowned for helping struggling musicians newly arrived from the South. Tampa Red’s spacious home was a haven for musicians, with its home cooking, guest rooms, and piano-equipped rehearsal room. His visitors and regulars were a veritable who’s who of postwar Chicago blues: Broonzy, Blind John Davis, Memphis Slim, Big Maceo, Willie Dixon,

Jazz Gillum, Big Joe Williams, Sonny Boy Williamson I, Doc Clayton, Robert Lockwood, Jr., Arthur Crudup, Washboard Sam, Romeo Nelson, Little Walter, Elmore James, and Muddy Waters. Tampa had a particularly strong influence on another guest, Robert Lee McCollum, who as Robert Nighthawk would merge his mentor's facile slide approach with a sustaining Delta whine.

During the late 1940s into the 1950s, the music of these newcomers became the dominant sound of Chicago blues. The band-driven, "deep-bottom Mississippi blues" of Muddy Waters in particular struck a resonant chord with former Southerners who congregated in West and South Side taverns. Waters had come to town in 1943 with an acoustic Silvertone, which could scarcely cut through the din. "I was banging my hand all up," he recalled, "so I went to a thumbpick. That still wasn't loud enough, so I started playing electric. When I came to Chicago, I had to work my blues up in there. When I did get it through, boy, I bust Chicago wide open with 'em."<sup>20</sup> On the Library of Congress field recordings he made on a Mississippi Delta plantation in the early 1940s, Waters had sung, "I never be satisfied" and "I just can't keep from crying."<sup>21</sup> In Chicago, his message evolved to a roaring proclamation of freedom and sexuality: "I'm a man, spelled 'M,' 'A,' child, 'N.'"

Owing to rationing and material shortages, few blues records were made during World War II. Immediately afterwards, the widespread availability of magnetic tape allowed virtually anyone to make records, and dozens of independent labels sprang into existence. In 1947, Waters landed at Aristocrat, the forerunner of Chess Records. On his early Aristocrat 78s, such as "I Can't Be Satisfied" and "I Feel Like Going Home," Waters played lightly amplified Robert Johnson figures accompanied by stand-up bass. In clubs, though, he delivered a dense and explosive sound with harmonica genius Little Walter, co-guitarist Jimmy Rogers, and drummer Baby Face Leroy. The band was so ferociously good, people nicknamed them the "Headhunters," since they could "cut anyone's head" in local battles of the bands. In 1950, Waters finally recorded with his full lineup for Chess. Vastly different from the jumps and ballads dominating the R&B charts, Waters's surging, beat-heavy rhythms signaled the beginning of the greatest creative era of Chicago blues. Soon Chess and its Checker subsidiary were offering 78s by Little Walter, Jimmy Rogers, Howlin' Wolf, John Brim, J. B. Lenoir, Willie Dixon, Sonny Boy Williamson, Otis Spann, and Eddie Boyd. Many other Chicago blues artists recorded for the smaller independent labels, such as Vee Jay, Atomic H, Cobra, JOB, Parrot, United, Chance, and Cool.

Elmore James and Howlin' Wolf, who featured guitarists Jody Williams and Hubert Sumlin in his Chicago lineup, proved themselves as adept as Muddy Waters in framing Delta blues in a band context. Fronting the roaring

Broomdusters, James bottlenecked in open D tuning on a Kay acoustic outfitted with a soundhole pickup. His Chicago-cut sides for the Fire and Enjoy labels are nothing less than monumental, both in the guitar and the vocal stylings. “After me there will be no more,”<sup>22</sup> James predicted, but following in his wake came J. B. Hutto, Johnny Littlejohn, Hound Dog Taylor, and the all-time cleanest slider of them all, Earl Hooker. “Earl Hooker was a monster,” says his cousin John Lee Hooker. “Nobody could beat him.”

Just as Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Elmore James, and many other Mississippians had emigrated to Chicago during the war era, many outstanding bluesmen from Texas and Oklahoma had gone to the West Coast to work in the shipyards, play clubs, and improve their overall lifestyles. Los Angeles, with its community of jump blues honkers, shouters, and wailers, was the home base for Specialty, Aladdin, Modern, Imperial, and other independent labels dedicated to issuing the R&B music being ignored by the majors. One of the first blues stars to record there was T-Bone Walker, who established amplified Texas blues guitar as a fixture in posh nightclubs and concert halls. Walker fronted swinging big bands, and like Charlie Christian, excelled at horn-inspired, single-note solos. “To me,” says Johnny Winter, “T-Bone Walker is pretty much the father of the electric blues style. He influenced everybody. He played syncopated, he changed the meter around, and he did things that nobody else did. He knew a lot of chords and was a much broader player than many people are aware of. He was the first guy who did it right, and he influenced everybody who came along after him. He really defined electric blues guitar.”<sup>23</sup>

Other bluesmen were soon making their names on the West Coast. Pee Wee Crayton divided his time between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Lowell Fulson, from Texas by way of Oklahoma, moved to Oakland, California, where he hit big with “Three O’Clock Blues” and “Every Day I Have the Blues.” Just across the San Francisco Bay, Louisiana-born Saunders King was swinging for the Rhythm label. T-Bone Walker disciple Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown made his first records in Los Angeles in 1947, but stayed in Texas, where he enjoyed a long association with the Houston-based Duke/Peacock label. By the mid 1950s, another generation of Texas-raised blues guitarists began its ascendancy: Johnny “Guitar” Watson relocated to Los Angeles and signed with Federal, while Albert Collins and Johnny Copeland began making singles in Houston.

But not all postwar Texas bluesmen gravitated toward jumping, band-oriented blues. Down-home traditionalists including Lightnin’ Hopkins, Lil’ Son Jackson, Smokey Hogg, and Frankie Lee Sims were making bristling records that were often a throwback to the prewar era. Hopkins was nearly as traditional as Blind Lemon Jefferson, whom he’d seen and greatly admired, and his cotton-field blues were as earthy as any on record.

“You know the blues come out of the field,” Hopkins explained. “That’s when you bend down, pickin’ that cotton, and sing, ‘Oh, Lord, please help me.’”<sup>24</sup> A natural-born storyteller, Hopkins had a genius for improvising songs, and placed a premium on originality. He made dozens of records for a variety of Houston- and Los Angeles-based labels, and by the early 1960s was a regular on the college circuit. During the 1960s, another great voice in old-time Texas country blues emerged from the Brazos country: Mance Lipscomb, a guileless songster and steady-handed finger-picker with a repertoire of nearly a thousand songs. To this day, though, most people associate Texas blues with horn sections and T-Bone-style solos. “A lot of people ask me what’s the difference between Chicago blues and Texas blues,” Albert Collins observed. “Well, we didn’t have harp players and slide guitar players out of Texas, so most of the blues guitars had a horn section. That was the difference. The bigger the band is, the better they like it in Texas. It’s hard to go down through there with just a rhythm section and get good response.”<sup>25</sup>

During the mid-1950s commercial heyday of postwar blues, independent labels such as Chess, Peacock, and Imperial scored hit after hit with hardcore blues. Then, around the summer of 1955, sales began to dwindle. Some industry executives blamed a depressed economy and the power of television to draw listeners away from radio, the best forum for blues promotion. But just up that radio dial, the real culprit was crackling through loud and clear: rock and roll. Elvis Presley’s “That’s All Right,” a reworked blues song by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup, and Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock” started an avalanche of rock hits, with major and independent labels scrambling to record young artists. Chess signed Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, who were both fine blues players as well as rockers, and began promoting their records, while the fortunes of older bluesmen such as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf began to dwindle.

In Chicago’s West Side clubs, though, a group of dedicated young guitarists was soon exploring an uninhibited new style. The major players – Otis Rush, Magic Sam Maghett, Freddie King, Buddy Guy, Joe Young, Luther Allison, Jimmy Dawkins, and Lonnie Brooks – were all born within a few years of each other, and during their teens or early twenties, they had all come north from Mississippi, Louisiana, or Texas. Their cathartic, vibrato-enriched vocals spoke of heartbreak and love gone wrong. Their story-telling solos were marked by visceral attacks with spiking tones and elastic bends. Their influences ranged from Waters and Wolf to B. B. King, T-Bone Walker, Bobby Bland, and Kenny Burrell. “The West Side sound was really a collaborative effort,” described Buddy Guy. “We were the best of friends. During the ’50s we used to have those Sunday afternoon guitar battles in blues clubs, where the guy would have a bottle of whiskey out there for the winner.

Luther Allison, myself, Otis Rush, Magic Sam, Earl Hooker – we was all doin’ that stuff. There was just a lot of clubs back then, and we were playing them in circles too. Sam was here on Tuesday, Buddy Guy on Wednesday, Otis on Thursday. It was like that, and it was a lot of fun.”<sup>26</sup>

Whereas Muddy Waters, Elmore James, and other middle-aged Chicago bluesmen regularly sat down onstage and played acoustics outfitted with soundhole pickups, the West Side upstarts stood tall and favored solidbodies. “Everybody bought Fender guitars,” Otis Rush recalled. “This was something new came out. The first one Magic Sam had was a Telecaster, and then he bought a Stratocaster. Buddy had a Stratocaster too. We wanted something loud and powerful. The stronger the amp was, the better for us – that’s why you’d hear a lot of loud music. The old Fender Bassman was a big seller and a strong amp.”<sup>27</sup>

With powerful guitar jabs and fever-and-chills vocals, Otis Rush was the first among them to score a hit, with his 1956 cover of Willie Dixon’s “I Can’t Quit You, Baby,” released on Cobra Records. Rush was soon moving in progressive directions. His sultry moaning and groaning in “My Love Will Never Die” foreshadowed 1960s soul ballads, while “All Your Love (I Miss Loving)” became a blues standard. The unrelentingly dark “Checking on My Baby” and “Double Trouble” epitomize what has become known as the “West Side sound.” On Rush’s nod, Cobra recorded Magic Sam in 1957, swamping “All Your Love” and “Everything’s Gonna Be Alright” with a then-new tremolo groove. Freddie King, already a session player, released his first single that year, “Country Boy” on the El-Bee label. In 1958, Buddy Guy cut “Sit and Cry” and “Try to Quit You Baby” for Cobra, with Rush on backup guitar. Even on his first Chicago sides, Guy displayed the pleading, gospel-influenced vocals and idiosyncratic solos that remain his stylistic hallmarks. Within a decade of its creation, the “West Side sound” had influenced a generation of blues-rockers led by Mike Bloomfield, Jimi Hendrix, and especially Eric Clapton, who recorded a scorching cover of Otis Rush’s “All Your Love” with John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers. While some of the West Side originators have retired or passed away, Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, Lonnie Brooks, and Jimmy Dawkins are still carrying on this stylistic tradition.

Some Southern-born postwar bluesmen found success in St. Louis, where Ike Turner, Albert King, and Little Milton were active by the mid 1950s, and Detroit, where John Lee Hooker, Calvin Frazier, Eddie Burns, Bobo Jenkins, Eddie Kirkland, and Baby Boy Warren were regulars at house parties and clubs. Others continued to perform and record in the South. In New Orleans, Eddie “Guitar Slim” Jones thrilled audiences with his over-the-top showmanship, while Earl King found success there with his first Ace single, the two-chord Louisiana blues “Those Lonely, Lonely Nights.”

Later in the decade, New Orleans-born Snooks Eaglin began a recording career that simultaneously straddled acoustic blues and R&B. Around Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Slim Harpo, Lightnin' Slim, Silas Hogan, Lazy Lester, and Lonesome Sundown were playing the relaxed, harmonica-and-guitar-driven "swamp blues" heard on many fine Excello releases.

Around the Mississippi Delta, many aspiring guitarists heard Robert Lockwood, Jr., Joe Willie Wilkins, and other guitarists on KFFA's popular *King Biscuit Time* radio program. In Memphis, B. B. King and Rufus Thomas hosted another vital blues radio show. During the early 1950s, producer Sam Phillips recorded B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Joe Hill Louis, and Jackie Brenston for his Memphis Recording Service, and then leased the masters to Chess and RPM, who gave the records widespread distribution. By 1955, Phillips's Sun Records had recorded Junior Parker, Walter Horton, Little Milton, James Cotton, Pat Hare, Earl Hooker, Joe Hill Louis, and Doctor Isaiah Ross, not to mention some earthshaking rockabilly by Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins (who aptly described rockabilly as "a country man's song with a black man's rhythm"). Down in Jackson, Mississippi, Lillian McMurry's Trumpet Records provided the pre-Chicago proving ground for Elmore James and Sonny Boy Williamson II.

While B. B. King, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins, and many of their contemporaries found fame as bandleaders and solo artists, other bluesmen proved nearly as influential via their roles as sidemen. Among the first and most impressive of these was Oscar Moore, who had played behind jazz legends Art Tatum and Lionel Hampton before the war and performed with the Nat "King" Cole Trio from 1937 through 1947, when he moved to Los Angeles and joined his brother, guitarist Johnny Moore, in the Three Blazers. In the early 1950s, Matt and Floyd Murphy, Willie Johnson, and Pat Hare exerted their influence in Memphis, while Lafayette Thomas and Johnny Heartsman played sessions in California. Some sidemen became known for their work with one or two artists, such as Eddie Taylor with Jimmy Reed and John Lee Hooker, Hubert Sumlin with Howlin' Wolf, Wayne Bennett and Roy Gaines with Bobby "Blue" Bland, and Jimmy Nolen with James Brown. Other full-time studio specialists included Mickey Baker in New York, Steve Cropper in Memphis, and Earl Hooker in Chicago.

As folk blues gained popularity during the late 1950s and early 1960s, several bluesmen who'd made 78s before World War II were "rediscovered" by blues aficionados and coaxed into recording again. Some, such as Bukka White, Skip James, Black Ace, Furry Lewis, and Mississippi John Hurt, had been performing all along. Son House, who had quit playing, had to be reminded of his old style. Rev. Robert Wilkins had long since forsaken blues for gospel, but his style was virtually intact. Testament, Vanguard, Arhoolie, Columbia, and Prestige/Riverside/Bluesville released new works



by the old masters, while Origin Jazz Library and Yazoo Records reissued old 78s on LPs.

As elder bluesmen were being re-appreciated, some talented but previously unrecorded musicians were discovered. Robert Pete Williams was found in a Louisiana penitentiary during the late 1950s. Fred McDowell, who had lived in Memphis during the 1930s, emerged as the reigning slide king of north Mississippi's hill country, where his droning, highly rhythmic bottleneck style and eerie tones are still imitated today. He first recorded for folklorist Alan Lomax in 1959 and went on to make several influential albums of blues and gospel songs. McDowell generously shared his musical knowledge, tutoring Bonnie Raitt and many local musicians, and his song "You Got to Move" became a staple in the Rolling Stones' repertoire.

### **Transatlantic blues**

"Now the story must be told," sang Brownie McGhee, "the blues had a baby, and they called it rock and roll." During the early 1960s, that offspring was the result of an international affair. While Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, and other bluesmen were virtually unknown to white America, they were heroes to the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Animals, Yardbirds, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, and other British musicians who found their records just as inspirational as those of Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, and Eddie Cochran. In an ironic yet welcome twist of fate, most white teenagers in America became aware of the great blues names via cover songs and songwriting credits on albums issued by their favorite rock bands.

Great Britain's love affair with the blues began during World War II, when the promotion of American folk blues, especially as played by Lead Belly, Josh White, and Big Bill Broonzy, became a cause célèbre for jazz critics, who spun their 78s on the BBC. By the early 1950s, Britain's trad jazz, a "lite" re-creation of Dixieland and other prewar American styles, was in full swing. One of its stars, Chris Barber, toured the US with his jazz band and arranged for Big Bill Broonzy, Josh White, and Brownie McGhee to perform traditional acoustic blues in British jazz clubs and recital halls.

These and other American bluesmen served as musical touchstones for the first important British guitar stars, Big Jim Sullivan and Hank Marvin. Idolized by young Jimmy Page, studio legend Sullivan was steeped in the records of Lead Belly and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. "When I was starting the guitar," he recalled, "we used to go out on the Thames in a big riverboat with people like Sonny and Brownie and Big Bill Broonzy. They would be playing, and I'd just sit there watching them. That was kind of the highlight for me."<sup>28</sup> Instrumental star Hank Marvin, who formed the

Shadows with Cliff Richard in 1958, likewise cited Broonzy and Lead Belly as his main influences for taking up guitar.

Before his death in August 1958, Big Bill Broonzy recommended that Barber bring Muddy Waters over. Just back from a tour of raucous Southern clubs, Waters, accompanied by pianist Otis Spann, opened his British tour with his Fender Telecaster and amp at full concert volume, causing aghast purists to retreat from the hall and proclaim the performance a musical catastrophe. “They thought I was a Big Bill Broonzy, which I wasn’t,” Muddy told author James Rooney. “I had my amplifier, and Spann and I was going to do a Chicago thing. We opened up in Leeds, England. I was definitely too loud for them. The next morning we were in the headlines of the paper – ‘Screaming Guitar and Howling Piano.’ That was when they were into the folk thing before the Rolling Stones.”<sup>29</sup> It would not be long, though, before “screaming guitar” would be all the rage.

During the late 1950s, Great Britain was enamored with skiffle, a folksy, bluesy, somewhat heavy-handed answer to America’s folk boom. The movement got its name from Dan Burley’s “Skiffle Boys,” cut in 1946 with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and hit its peak with Lonnie Donegan’s 1956 recording of Lead Belly’s “Rock Island Line.” Dozens of future British stars got their start strumming skiffle. “Lonnie Donegan set all them kids on the road,” remembered George Harrison. “Everybody was in a skiffle group. You only needed two chords.”<sup>30</sup>

By the early 1960s, aspiring British musicians were avidly seeking American blues and rock and roll records. Jimmy Page rapidly made the progression through Elvis, Ricky Nelson, and Gene Vincent to the hard-core blues of Elmore James and B. B. King. Eric Clapton formed his first band, the Roosters, to play covers of Lightnin’ Slim, Fats Domino, and T-Bone Walker. Former boyhood pals Keith Richards and Mick Jagger woodshedded with Chess records from the mid 1950s, especially those of Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry.

The earliest country blues, issued on LP for the first time by Origin Jazz Library, were likewise enthusiastically received. Columbia’s issuing of Robert Johnson’s 78s on two albums had an especially profound impact on Clapton, who would ultimately spearhead the British blues boom. “Both of the Robert Johnson albums actually cover all of my desires musically,” Clapton recalled. “Every angle of expression and every emotion is expressed on both of those albums.”<sup>31</sup> His other early favorites were *Ray Charles Live at Newport*, *The Best of Muddy Waters*, *Howlin’ Wolf*, *Freddie King Sings*, Jimmy Reed’s *Rockin’ with Reed*, Chuck Berry’s *One Dozen Berries*, and B. B. King’s *Live at the Regal*.

A magnet for aspiring musicians, London’s Skiffle Centre was transformed into the London Blues and Barrelhouse Club, where Long John

Baldry and former Barber bandmates Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies held court. Mick Jagger, Brian Jones, Ginger Baker, and Jack Bruce all took turns in Korner's Blues Inc. "We'd all meet in this blues club, Alexis Korner's place," Keith Richards explains. "And Brian, he stunned us playing Elmore James stuff on slide onstage with Alexis, along with Cyril Davies, Nicky Hopkins, and Jack Bruce on bass. All of those guys were gathering together in just a few spots in London."<sup>32</sup> Jagger and Richards were soon sharing a flat with Jones. They named their band after Muddy Waters's "Rollin' Stone," and in the months to come their covers of Bo Diddley, Jimmy Reed, Slim Harpo, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf tunes would lead a new generation of listeners to the blues. "When we started the Rolling Stones, we were just little kids, right?" Richards reminisced. "We felt we had some of the licks down, but our aim was to turn people on to the blues. If we could turn them on to Muddy and Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker, then our job was done."<sup>33</sup> For black bluesmen back home in America, though, it was a new beginning.

Chess talent scout Willie Dixon, who first played in London in 1960, provided encouragement and demos of his songs to aspiring British rockers. In 1962 Dixon and Memphis Slim helped organize the first of nine annual American Folk Blues Festival tours of Europe. With front-row tickets for the London show, the Rolling Stones and other members of the British rock royalty watched John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and Shakey Jake from just a few feet away. Used to playing Detroit dives, Hooker was floored by the reception: "When I got to England in '62, it was like God just let Jesus go over there. That's all you could hear: 'John Lee Hooker!'"<sup>34</sup> The real thing, amplified and cathartic, had arrived. The following season, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Muddy Waters, Lonnie Johnson, Big Joe Williams, Matt "Guitar" Murphy, Dixon, and Memphis Slim came over. The Yardbirds, with Clapton on guitar, recorded with Williamson at the Crawdaddy Club. By 1965, Buddy Guy, Lightnin' Hopkins, Big Mama Thornton, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Sleepy John Estes, J. B. Lenoir, and Howlin' Wolf had also played overseas.

John Mayall's London-based Bluesbreakers became the testing ground for many upper-echelon British blues guitarists, with Eric Clapton, Mick Taylor, and Peter Green passing through its ranks. Clapton's fire-breathing tracks on Mayall's *Blues Breakers* LP brought him "Clapton Is God" cult status. No mere mimic, Clapton used the sped-up licks of his idols Robert Johnson, Otis Rush, and Albert, B. B., and Freddie King to tap into an emotional reservoir all his own. Soon after the release of *Blues Breakers* in 1966, Clapton formed Cream, which covered Dixon, Waters, and Skip James tunes on its first album.

As the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Yardbirds, Animals, Cream, and other British bands began touring North America and selling millions of albums,

the originators who inspired them finally began getting some recognition at home. “That’s a funny damn thing,” Muddy Waters reported. “Had to get somebody from out of another country to let my white kids over here know where we stand. They’re crying for bread and got it in their backyard.”<sup>35</sup> For a while, though, it was an uphill battle. Soon after landing in the US, the Beatles announced their desire to see Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley. “Muddy Waters,” asked one reporter, “where’s that?” An incredulous Paul McCartney is said to have answered, “Don’t you know who your own famous people are here?”<sup>36</sup>

But by the time the Beatles landed in America, there were already some savvy – and soon to be highly influential – young musicians studying the blues masters. In Beaumont, Texas, Johnny Winter was playing along to the records of Son House, Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters, just as John Hammond was doing in New York. In Seattle, Jimi Hendrix was copping licks from his dad’s Muddy Waters and B. B. King 45s. In Chicago, Mike Bloomfield, Charlie Musselwhite, and other young white musicians were making pilgrimages to local clubs to jam with Waters, Wolf, Rush, Magic Sam, and other bluesmen. Bloomfield joined harmonica ace Paul Butterfield on the 1965 breakthrough album *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band*, which featured an integrated lineup playing the music of Elmore James, Little Walter, Muddy Waters, and Willie Dixon. America’s blues-rock boom was on, and soon powered-up blues songs were being played to stadium crowds by Canned Heat, Blues Project, Fleetwood Mac, Cream, Johnny Winter, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Doors, Led Zeppelin, the Jeff Beck Group, and the Allman Brothers Band.

### **Modern blues**

During the 1970s and 1980s, the blues continued to serve as a launch pad for rockers from Aerosmith and the Allman Brothers to Van Halen and ZZ Top. Bluesmen such as James Cotton, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, and Albert Collins continued to tour the country and make records, while blues specialty labels like Delmark and Alligator made new recordings of venerable performers and introduced many up-and-comers, such as Lurrie Bell. By decade’s end, the predominantly white Fabulous Thunderbirds, Roomful of Blues, and the Nighthawks, all of which blended blues, R&B, jump, and rock, had become trendy. Blues strains were resounding in world beat styles as well, with Donald Kinsey incorporating Albert King-approved licks into his performances with Bob Marley & The Wailers, and many west African musicians drawing inspiration from American blues.

Stevie Ray Vaughan's 1983 debut album, *Texas Flood*, gave the blues its biggest boost since the British Invasion. An unabashed admirer of Albert King, Lonnie Mack, Guitar Slim, and Jimi Hendrix, Vaughan had inescapable charisma and a white-hot sound based closely on that of his heroes, and his releases drew a massive audience to the blues. Until his tragic death seven years later, Vaughan remained America's foremost blues figure. Straddling blues and R&B, Robert Cray's 1986 Grammy Award-winning album *Strong Persuader* also hit hard on the crossover market, making it further up the Top 40 charts than any of Vaughan's releases.

Just as the British bands had helped resurrect the careers of bluesmen in the mid 1960s, the success of Vaughan and Cray brought an upswing in bookings, reissues, and new sessions for veterans such as Johnny "Clyde" Copeland, Albert King, Albert Collins, Lowell Fulson, Koko Taylor, Etta James, Gatemouth Brown, Otis Rush, Son Seals, Robert Lockwood, Jr., Lonnie Brooks, and Luther Allison. Meanwhile, traditional-minded performers such as Bowling Green John Cephas, Rory Block, and John Hammond focused on recreating – and occasionally updating – classic prewar country blues. The Kinsey Report and Joe Louis Walker successfully merged rock and funk, and a new school of soul blues (in which guitar played a lesser role) sprang up in Mississippi and other parts of the South, with Z. Z. Hill, Bobby Bland, Bobby Rush, and Little Milton at the head of the class.

The rock–blues crossover trend intensified in the late 1980s when B. B. King recorded with U2 and made it onto MTV. John Lee Hooker followed suit in the 1990s, recording hits with Carlos Santana and Bonnie Raitt before scoring his most lucrative gig ever, appearing in a televised Pepsi commercial. Eric Clapton enjoyed widespread commercial success by revisiting his country blues roots on 1992's *Unplugged*, and then playing a well-received set of electric blues covers on 1994's *From the Cradle*; he capped the decade with a two-CD retrospective called *Blues*. The Rolling Stones highlighted songs by Robert Johnson, Fred McDowell, Willie Dixon, and Muddy Waters during their celebrated tours of the 1990s. Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, and many other longtime bluesmen made tough new albums, and hundreds of CD reissues of previously recorded prewar and postwar blues songs hit the market.

By the late 1990s, blues festivals and cruises had become big summer draws, blues societies and magazines had proliferated, and the most dedicated fans were making pilgrimages to Mississippi to see bluesmen play their home turf, with favorite destinations being Big Jack Johnson and Booba Barnes in local clubs, and R. L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough at authentic juke joints. And while most new blues releases tended to feature headliners backed by studio bands, Rooster Blues and Fat Possum specialized

in capturing the primal, workaday band sounds of R. L. Burnside and sons, Junior Kimbrough, T-Model Ford, Booba Barnes, the Jelly Roll Kings, and Lonnie Shields.

The blues revival continues to this day, with B. B. King, Hubert Sumlin, Buddy Guy, and Otis Rush still headlining, and newer acts like Bernard Allison, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Corey Harris, Keb' Mo', Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Jonny Lang, and Deborah Coleman filling in the ranks. And whether they know it or not, virtually every blues guitarist is the musical descendant of that nameless man W. C. Handy saw in the Mississippi train station a century ago.